

Introduction to Zoroastrianism

by

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Old Iranian Religion, Zoroastrianism

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The same web site contains a number of other translations, as well, some of which are quite up to date.

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Āb-zōhr: I/1, 48-49

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Haoma: XI/6, 2003, 659-67

Homosexuality: XI/4, 2004, pp. 440-41.

Note on pronunciation

A circumflex means long vowel, e.g., Gâthâ approximately “garthar” (as in Bostonian *car*) without pronouncing the *r*.

zh like the *s* in leisure, treasure, etc.

kh like Persian and Arabic *č*, German *ch* in *ach* (not like *ch* in *ich!*) and Spanish Spanish *j* in *bajo* (not like Hispanic Spanish *j = h*). Also not like Indic *kh = k-h*.

In other publications:

Long vowel is indicated by a “macron,” e.g., *ā* = long *a*.

A haček is used as follows: *č = ch*, *ǰ = j*, *š = sh*, *ž = zh* (as above).

x is usually *kh* (as above).

Greek *β = v*, *γ = Arabic and č* Spanish *g* in *haga*, *δ = th* (in *the*), *θ = th* (in *think*).

ZOROASTRIANISM. A BRIEF OVEVIEW

From an inscription by King Darius

Ahuramazdâ is the great god
who set in place this earth,
who set in place yonder sky,
who set in place man,
who set in place peace for man,
who made Darius king,
one king over many, one commander of many.

The Avestan Ashem Vohu prayer

Order is the best good reward there is.
There are wished-for things in the wish for this one
when one's Order is for the best Order.

From another inscription by King Darius

King Darius announces:
When Ahuramazdâ saw this earth being in turmoil, he gave it to me.
He made me king. I am king.
By the greatness of Ahuramazdâ,
I set it down in its place.
They did whatever was told them by me,
as was my wish.

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world, going back to the 2nd millennium B.C.E. and the Iranian tribes still living in Central Asia, before they moved south onto the Iranian Plateau.

The ancient Iranians imagined a world in which **Order** and **Chaos** constantly vied for supremacy. The partisans of Order were heavenly powers with **Ahura Mazdâ**, the All-knowing Ruler,¹ at their head, who combated Chaos in the form of Darkness, Decay, and Death to reestablish Order in the form of Light, Growth, and Life.

Both Order and Chaos had their followers among living beings. In fact, all living beings had to make a choice of which side they wanted to support. The good would declare for Ahura Mazdâ, imitating and following the example of the first living being to worship him, **Zarathustra**, chosen for that purpose at the beginning of time.

With the help of His human followers, especially, the priests who perform sacrifices for Him, Ahura Mazdâ becomes the ruler of the universe and reinstalls His cosmic Order by making the sun rise and the rains fall. The sun brings light and warmth to the earth, His daughter, and the rains fertilize her, making her produce all good things for living beings.

In the Achaemenid period, the king similarly acted as Ahura Mazdâ's chosen, who by his sacrifices supported the deity, who in turn supported the king, bestowing upon him the power to reestablish Order on earth.

¹ Av. *ahura* = OInd. *asura*. Av. *mazdâ* is an adjective meaning literally “one who puts everything in his mind.” The precise meaning of OInd. *asura*, Iran. *ahura*, is not known; “(ruling) lord” seems to be the implication in Avestan, but it may originally have meant “engenderer,” hence “master (of the family), *pater familias*.” Traditionally, the name is rendered as the Wise Lord. See Skjærvø, 2002, “Ahura Mazdâ and Årmaiti.”

There were other deities beside Ahura Mazdā, both good and bad. The bad ones were the **daēwas**, the “old gods,” who had chosen to side with evil. Their ruler was the **Evil Spirit**, whose main agent was the **Lie**, the female principle of cosmic deception. The Lie would tell living beings that Ahura Mazdā was not the true ruler of the universe and that Order was not good.

While Ahura Mazdā and his helpers had made and arranged the Ordered universe, it was the Evil Spirit and his agents that had made all bad things and inserted them into Ahura Mazdā’s world.

It was this aspect of Zoroastrianism that the West found so interesting. While Christian theologians strove to explain why God’s perfect world seemed imperfect, the Zoroastrians had a simple answer: it had always been that way, but would not always remain so.

In the *Avesta*, Zarathustra is presented as a mythical poet and priest, to whom Ahura Mazdā confided the sacred ritual texts and the other ingredients of the sacrifice for him to take them down to proclaim and use among mortals. For the later Zoroastrians, he was the one who received Ahura Mazdā’s word and transmitted it to mankind. This would qualify him as a “prophet” in the Classical Greek, Biblical, Muslim, and modern senses.

Zarathustra is not a “historical” person in the sense that he belongs in a known historical context or that there are recognizable historical details associated with him. He is also not represented as a “real” person in the texts, much less so than, for instance, Jesus in the Gospels. There is therefore no advantage in assuming that he was a historical person who lived in such and such a place at such and such a time. The futility of such assumptions is indicated by the disagreements among Western scholars on these points.

The Greeks called Zarathustra Zoroaster, hence the name of the religion. The followers of this religion are also called Mazdeans (or Mazdayasnians) after the Old Iranian term *mazda-yasna*, which literally means “he who sacrifices (performs a ritual of offerings) to Ahura Mazdā.” Correspondingly, the religion is also called Mazdaism or Mazdayasnianism.

In the Avestan pantheon, there were several great gods, who also deserved sacrifices, though Ahura Mazdā was **the greatest** of them. Among them were Mithra and Anāhitā, to whom Ahura Mazdā himself sacrificed.

Mithra battles the powers of Darkness so that the sun can rise and travel across the sky; in late Zoroastrianism, he is identified with the sun.

Anāhitā is the heavenly river, presumably the Milky Way, the greatest female deity, who is in charge of fertility.

Beside these two and several other great deities, Ahura Mazdā was closely related to six divine beings that he had sired himself and whose father he was. These are the Amesha Spentas, or **Life-giving Immortals**. The Life-giving Immortals originated from Ahura Mazdā’s first cosmic sacrifice, by which the world of the gods came into being. They have correspondences in the world of living beings, however, for instance, Spentā Ārmaiti, of **Life-giving Humility**, is Ahura Mazdā’s daughter and wife, but also the Earth.

The role of humans in the cosmic scheme is to support Ahura Mazdā and His world, which they do by “thinking good thoughts, speaking good speech, and doing good deeds.”

Those who “think bad thoughts, speak bad speech, and do bad deeds” support the Evil Spirit.

At the end of their lives, everything a person has thought, spoken, and done is added up on a balance. If the good thoughts, etc. weigh the most, the person goes to paradise, but if the bad thoughts, etc., weigh the most, the person goes to hell.

At the end of the world, however, all humans will be cleansed of evil and be in paradise forever.

The oldest stage of the Iranian religion is known from the *Avesta*, the holy book of the Zoroastrians, which is a collection of texts of different dates and various contents that were **orally** transmitted for centuries and even millennia before they were finally written down about 500 C.E.

The texts are in two forms of the language, one older and one younger; accordingly, we divide the *Avesta* into the *Old Avesta* and the *Young (Younger) Avesta*. The language of the *Old Avesta* may have been spoken in Central Asia in the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. and that of the *Young Avesta* in the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. The oldest manuscripts were written in the 13th century, but most of them are much younger.

From 520 B.C.E. on we have the cuneiform inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings, who worshipped Ahura Mazdā and followed the religion of the *Avesta*. From then until the Arab invasion in the 7th century C.E., Zoroastrianism was the religion of the Iranian kings. It survived the foreign invasion, but, in the tenth century, a number of Zoroastrians traveled to India to escape oppression in Iran and became the ancestors of the modern-day Parsees, the Indian Zoroastrians.

From the ninth century on, Zoroastrian theologians began writing down their knowledge and discussions about the religion in the language of the time, Pahlavi. These texts, often referred to as the Pahlavi Books, constitute the largest corpus of Zoroastrian writings. The manuscripts are the same age as those of the *Avesta*.

1. THE INDO- IRANIANS

Stepping back in time, the scattered evidence indicates that, sometime in the third millennium B.C.E., the Iranians had separated from their cousins, the Indo-Aryans,¹ with whom they originally shared a common religion and oral literary traditions reaching back into Indo-European times,² although, in the oldest texts, there are great differences between the two religions, clearly the result of diverging developments over many hundreds of years.

These were probably nomadic, later in part settled, peoples occupying the steppes of southern Russia and the Central Asian republics at a remote prehistoric period (before 3000 BCE?).

1.2. The Indo-Aryans

Some time about 2000 B.C.E., the Indo-Aryans migrated southeastward into what is today's Pakistan and western India, while the descendants of the second-millennium Iranians migrated onto the Iranian plateau.

This simple picture is complicated, however, by linguistic evidence from Mesopotamia, Palestine, and even Anatolia of Indo-Iranian, even Indo-Aryan, presence in those areas.

In the El-Amarna tablets from Palestine dating from the middle of the 15th century B.C.E. contain the Indo-Iranian-looking royal names: Arta-manyā ("he who thinks Order") and Suwar-dāta ("given by the sun").³

In the early 14th century B.C.E. a treaty was concluded between the Hittite king Shupiluliuma and the Hurrite king of the Mitanni, Matiwaza, in which the Mitanni gods are listed, among them: Mitra-Varuna, Indara, and the two Nasatyas, which are some of the principal gods of the Old Indo-Aryan pantheon.⁴

Finally, a text by a Mitanni named Kikkuli about horses and horse races written in Hittite contains Indo-Iranian technical terms, but their linguistic form is typically Indic, for instance, *aika-wartana* "one round" contains the numeral *aika*, Old Indic *eka*, different from Avestan *aewa*, Old Persian *aiva*.

1.3. The Iranians

Seeking for the origin of the Iranians, that is, the peoples who spoke Iranian languages, there are two two mutually supporting approaches. One is the archeological approach, which consists in trying to identify Iranian-speaking peoples

¹ These are called Indo-Aryans, to distinguish them from other population groups in the Subcontinent speaking non-Indo-European languages and *not* related to the Iranian languages, such as the Dravidic and Tibeto-Burmese peoples. — On the question of the Indo-Aryans, their dates, and migrations, see the summary and discussion in Lamberg-Karlovsky, 2002.

² See, e.g., Mallory, 1989, for a survey of the Indo-Europeans. On their myths and literature, see, e.g., Puhvel, 1987; Watkins, 1995, and the entire work of Georges Dumézil.

³ <http://www.specialtyinterests.net/ea.html>

⁴ <http://www.geocities.com/indoeurop/tree/indo/mitanni.html>, <http://idcs0100.lib.iup.edu/WestCivI/Hurrian/mi>

with archeological sites and remains, a second is the linguistic approach, by which the point of origin of the oldest Iranian literature and language is sought, and the third is the literary approach.

Since the Iranians did not have writing, it has not been possible to identify them securely in the archeological record of Central Asia and Iran, although there have been speculations.¹ As for the *Avesta*, it never refers to historical events, but it does contain series of geographical names.²

1.3.1. Geographical names in the Avesta

The *Avesta* contains two lists of geographical names in two texts: the hymn to Mithra and the first chapter of the *Videvdad*, in which lands made by Ahura Mazdā are listed. The principal names in these two lists are the following:

1. Haraivian Margu (Margiane), Sogdian Gava, and Khwârazm (Chorasmia).

2. Gava inhabited by Sogdians, strong Margu, Bâkhdhri (Bactria) the beautiful with uplifted banners, Nisâya, which is between Margu and Bâkhdhri, Haraiva, Xnanta, inhabited by Verkânas (Hyrcanians), Harakhvati (Arachosia) the beautiful, and Haetumant (Helmand), rich and glorious.

Several of these place names are well known from historical documents, and several of them have, indeed, survived till today. Looking at the map, which is made after the information of Greek historians and Iranian texts, we see that the western-most of the names mentioned in the *Avesta*, is Hyrcania, which in historical times was an area and an Achaemenid province to the southeast of the Caspian Sea. All the other identifiable names are to the east of this area:

Haraiva, the Greek Areia and modern Herat in southwestern Afghanistan;

Harakhvati, the Greek Arachosia in the area of modern Qandahar in southeastern Afghanistan;

Haetumant, the river Helmand in southern Afghanistan;

Bâkhdhri, the Greek Bactria, modern Balkh, in northern Afghanistan;

Nisâya in southwestern Turkmenistan;

Margu, the Greek Margiane, modern Merv, in southern Turkmenistan;

Sogdiana, in southern Uzbekistan, with the cities of Samarcand and Bukhara;

Khwârazmi, the Greek Chorasmia, modeern Khwarazm, south of the Aral Sea.

We see that the horizon of the Avestan texts is Central Asia between the Caspian and Aral Seas and the Helmand basis in southern Afghanistan.

From the historical and linguistic evidence, as well as the geographical horizon of the *Young Avesta*, we can therefore tentatively conclude that the oldet Avestan texts originated among the ancient Iranians who inhabited the area between the Aral Sea and modern Afghanistan in the second millennium B.C.E., that is, in the area of the modern Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The younger texts, however, were probably composed in the area of modern southern Afghanistan and eastern Iran.

1.3.2. The evidence of the Achaemenid inscriptions

The empire of the Achaemenid kings, as described in their inscriptions, as well as by the Greek historian Herodotus, contained many of the same lands that are listed in the *Avesta*. The inscriptions differ from the *Avesta* mainly in listing lands and peoples inhabiting the western part of the empire, as well, among them the Persians, Medes, and Parthians, well known from the Greek and Latin literature. In addition, the inscriptions list several types of Sakas, whom the Greeks called Scythians, who inhabit the areas from north of the Black Sea to the east of the Aral Sea as far as the Issyk Köl.

¹ They have tentatively been correlated with various pottery found on the Iranian Plateau and, most recently, with the “Bactria-Margiana Complex” ca. 2100-1750, characterized by cities with massive fortifications with a fortified central building complex surrounded by artisans’ quarters, etc..

² <http://members.aol.com/ahreemanx/page16.html>

These various Iranian tribes were the remote ancestors of the modern Persians, Tajiks, Kurds, Afghans, Baloch, etc.

1.3.3. Persians and Medes

The earliest evidence for Persian and Median presence on the Plateau comes from the Assyrian annals, records of the campaigns by Assyrian kings, in which peoples they came into contact with or subdued are mentioned. The annals give us a good chronology, but the geography is poor. Often, the peoples can be located only within a very general area, and personal names are rare.

Here, Parsuwash and Mâtaï are first mentioned in the 9th century in the area of Lake Urmia in the records of Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.E.), who, in 835 B.C.E., is said to have received tributes from 27 kings of Parsuwash. Subsequent kings, Shamsi-Adad V (823-811 B.C.E.) and Adad-Narari III (810-783 B.C.E.) also campaigned against them; in the annals of Shamsi-Adad for the year 821 B.C.E., a civil war is mentioned in a land stretching from Bît Bunaki to Parsamas.

Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 B.C.E.), who campaigned as far as Mount Bikni = Mount Alvand (q.v.), refers to the Medes as the “mighty Medes” or the “distant Medes.”

From Sargon II’s reign (721-705 B.C.E.) we have the mention of a nephew of King Dalta of the Ellipi by the name Aspabara, which can hardly be other than Iranian *aspabâra* “rider, knight,” but his uncle’s name is un-Iranian.

At the battle of Halule on the Tigris in 691 B.C.E. Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.E.) faced an army of troops from Elam, Parshumash, Anzan (Anshan, q.v.), and others.

Also in the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon (680-69 B.C.E.) and elsewhere “kings” of the Medes are mentioned (for the sources, see Waters, 1999).

2. IRANIAN LANGUAGES AND PEOPLES

The oldest known Iranian languages are Old and Young Avestan and Old Persian. These languages permit us to reconstruct proto-Iranian as a branch of Indo-Iranian, an eastern branch of the Indo-European group of languages. Proto-Indo-Iranian (the parent language of Iranian and Indic or Indo-Aryan) may have been spoken in the area south and southeast of the Aral sea in the 3rd millennium B.C.E.. It split into Iranian and Indo-Aryan some time before 2000 B.C.E.

2.1. Avestan

Avestan is the language in which the most ancient Iranian religious texts are written, the Avesta. The Avesta is collection of miscellaneous texts first compiled and committed to writing in the mid-first millennium of our era. Before this time it had been transmitted orally by specially trained priests. This text corpus was subsequently, after the Muslim conquest, considerably reduced in volume.

The extant texts of each part of the collection go back to a set of single manuscripts dating from the 11th-12th centuries. Our earliest extant manuscripts date only from the latter half of the 13th century, although most of them are of much later date. This situation always has to be kept in mind when we discuss the Avesta and the Avestan language.

While both history and linguistics indicate that Old Persian was the language spoken in modern Fârs in southern Iran (hence Farsi = Persian), the language of the Avesta must have belonged to tribes from northeastern Iran. The Avesta contains a few geographical names, all belonging to northeastern Iran, that is, roughly the area covered by modern Afghanistan plus the areas to the north and south of Afghanistan. We are therefore entitled to conclude that Avestan was spoken primarily by tribes from that area. Only once is a possibly westerly name mentioned, namely Raghâ, if this is modern Rey south of Tehran, which in antiquity was regarded as the center of the Median Magi, but this

identification is not compelling.¹

We distinguish between texts in “Old Avestan” (OAv.) and texts in “Young(er) Avestan” (YAv.).

The Old Avestan texts comprise the *Gâthâs* and the *Yasna Haptanghâiti*, both of which are contained in the section of the Avesta called the *Yasna*, as well as various fragments scattered throughout the *Yasna*.

The Young Avestan texts are the other texts. Among these we must distinguish between genuine, old Young Avestan texts, that is, texts written in a consistent, correct language, and texts in late Young Avestan, compiled at a stage when Young Avestan was no longer a living language and the authors and compilers only had an incomplete knowledge of it.

The texts contain no historical allusions, so they cannot be dated exactly, but Old Avestan is a language closely akin to the oldest Indic language, found in the oldest parts of the Rigveda, and should therefore probably be dated to about the same time. This date has been much debated, but it seems probable—on archeological, as well as linguistic grounds—that the oldest poems were composed in the first half of the 2nd millennium B.C.E.

Compared with Old Avestan, Young Avestan represents a changed form of the language, linguistically close to Old Persian, and we may assume that it too was spoken in the first half of the 1st millennium, perhaps through the Median period, i.e., roughly the 10th-6th centuries. Such a dating, on one hand, accounts for the absence of references to western Iran in the texts (with the possible exception of Median Raghâ); on the other hand, it provides the necessary time span for Avestan to go through an “intermediate” period after the Old Avestan period before it developed into Young Avestan.

2.2. Median and Scythian

Beside Old Persian and Avestan other Iranian languages must have existed in the 1st millennium before our era. Of these Median, spoken in western Iran and presumably “official” language during the Median period (ca. 700-559), is known from numerous loan-words in Old Persian. Old northwestern languages, probably spoken by the Scythian Alan tribes are known from early inscriptions and personal and place names. In addition the Scythian tribes in central Asia must have spoken variants of Iranian that differed from Old Persian and Avestan. A few names of Scythian gods are mentioned in Herodotus’s *Histories*, as well as the Median word for “dog,” *spaka*.

2.3. Old Persian

Iranian tribes calling themselves Parswa (i.e. Persian) are found in (north)western Iran from the 9th cent. B.C.E. onward,² but the extant Old Persian texts, written in a cuneiform script, are from the Achaemenid period (ca. 558-330; the texts date from between 522 and ca. 350 B.C.E.) and represent a language spoken in southwestern Iran (Persia). The cuneiform script was probably invented under Darius for the purpose of recording his deeds. It was the first cuneiform script to be deciphered and provided the clue to all the other cuneiform scripts. The Old Persian language as we know it from the inscriptions (5th-4th cents.) was already about to change to Middle Persian. It is therefore probable that Old Persian had already been spoken for a few centuries before this time, that is, throughout most of the first half of the first millennium B.C.

2.4. Middle Iranian Languages

Middle Iranian is the common name for numerous Iranian languages, now extinct, that were spoken throughout Iran and central Asia from about the 4th century b.c.e. up to after the Islamic conquest. They can be grouped together with Old Persian, on one hand, into a southwestern group, and with Median and Avestan, on the other, into a northern and northeastern group.

¹ See Skjærvø, 1995, “The Avesta as Source.”

² See Waters, 1999.

Among the Middle Iranian languages is Parthian, spoken in Parthia, east of the Caspian Sea, which became an official language under the Parthian (Arsacid) rulers of Iran (ca. 247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.). It is known mainly from a few royal Parthian inscriptions dating from the last couple of centuries of Parthian rule and from the Manichean texts.

2.5. Middle Persian, Pahlavi

The Middle Iranian language most closely related to Old Persian is Middle Persian, which is known from a variety of sources: inscriptions and Manichean texts, the earliest of which date from the 3rd cent. c.e., and from the Zoroastrian scriptures, most of which were written down in the 8th-9th century, although transmitted orally for a long time. The Middle Persian inscriptions, most of them located in southern Iran, are written in a script derived from Aramaic, and the Zoroastrian texts in a still more developed form of this script. The language of the Zoroastrian texts is commonly referred to as Pahlavi.

The Pahlavi manuscripts all come from either India or Iran.

A few pages from a Middle Persian translation of the Psalter (the Psalms of Salomon) were also found there. It is written in a script situated between the script of the inscriptions and the Pahlavi script, though closer to the former.

The Avestan script is based upon the Pahlavi script with elements from the Psalter script.

3. SOURCE TEXTS

The Old Iranian religion is known from a variety of sources, the oldest of which is the *Avesta*, which contain texts composed in two different, but closely related, Old Iranian languages. One is grammatically quite similar to the language of the oldest Indic texts, the *Rigveda*, which dates from the second millennium B.C.E., the other is grammatically more similar to the language of the Achaemenid inscriptions, Old Persian, which dates from the second half of the first millennium B.C.E. There is also a translation of most parts of the *Avesta* into Middle Persian (Pahlavi), the official language of the Sasanian empire (224-637 C.E.).¹ The importance of these facts for the dating of the texts will be discussed later on.

3.1. The Avesta

The *Old Avesta* contains the five *Gâthâs* (literally, “songs”) and the *Yasna Haptanghâiti* (literally, “the sacrifice in seven sections”).² In the present state of the text, it is embedded in the middle of a long Young Avestan text called the *Yasna* (Y.), which is the text recited during the daily morning sacrifice, also called *yasna* (= Old Indic *yajña*). The text of the *Yasna* is divided into seventy-two sections (*hâitis*) in the manuscripts and, in Western editions, further subdivided into smaller sections (often referred to as strophes or stanzas).

The five *Gâthâs*, named after their opening words, are the *Ahunavaitî Gâthâ* “the song containing the *Ahuna Vairiya* (prayer)” (Y.27.13 + Y.28-34), the *Ushtawaitî Gâthâ* “the song containing Wishes” (Y.43-46), the *Spentâmanyû Gâthâ* “the song of the Life-giving Inspiration” (Y.47-50), the *Vohukhshathrâ Gâthâ* “the song of the Good Command” (Y.51), and the *Vahishtôishî Gâthâ* “the song of the Best Ritual” (Y.53 + Y.54.1).³ In the regular *yasna* ceremony, the *Yasna Haptanghâiti* (Y.35-41) is placed between the first and second *Gâthâs*.⁴

¹ Old Persian and Middle Persian are the “grand-parent” and “parent” of modern Persian (Farsi). See Skjærvø, 1994, pp. 203-4, 1999, pp. 8-9, on the question of the origin of this translation.

² Not “Worship of the Seven chapters,” as Boyce, 1996, p. XIII.

³ The fact that the *Vahishtôishî Gâthâ* (Y.53) differs some from the other *Gâthâs* in meter and contents, has sometimes led scholars to suggest it was not composed by Zarathustra himself. In my opinion, its form and contents agree perfectly with the fact that it is the conclusion of the Old Avesta.

⁴ Below, the *Gâthâs* are referred by prefixing their number before the *Yasna* number, e.g., 2.46.3 = second *Gâthâ*, Y.46, strophe 3. Similarly, YH.37 = *Yasna Haptanghâiti*, Y.37.

Western scholars from about the turn of the century on began using the term *gâthâ* for each of the sections (*hâiti*) into which the *Gâthâs* are subdivided (the fourth and fifth consist of only one *hâiti* each), altogether seventeen (7 + 4 + 4 + 1 + 1) *hâitis*. This practice provided the basis for various attempts to put the “*Gâthâs*” (= *hâitis*) in chronological order.

The *Young Avesta* contains a miscellany of texts, among them the *Yasna* (Y.), which is the text recited during the *yasna* ritual;¹ the *Yashts*, hymns to individual deities; the *Videvdad* (also spelled *Widêwdâd*, *Vendidad*, etc.), which contains ritual prescriptions for dealing with pollution by dead matter, such as blood and corpses; and various other texts. The *Young Avesta* also contains evidence that allows us to locate the peoples among whom it was composed. Two Young Avestan texts contain lists of countries known to their authors, *Yasht* 10 and *Videvdad* chap. 1. Among these countries are Khorasmia, Marv, Sogdiana, Haraiva (area of modern Herat), Arachosia (area of modern Qandahar), and the Helmand river, that is, countries in the area stretching from the Aral Sea through modern northeastern Iran and Afghanistan.²

The name of Zarathustra (Avestan Zarathushtra) is mentioned several times in all five *Gâthâs*, but is absent from the *Yasna Haptanghâiti*. It is omnipresent in the *Young Avesta*, where Zarathustra is a mythological figure fighting evil and to whom Ahura Mazdâ communicates all the knowledge needed by mankind. By the end of the nineteenth - beginning of the twentieth centuries, Western scholars had decided – on minimal evidence – that Zarathustra was an historical prophet, who reformed the inherited religion of the Iranians, thus providing Zoroastrianism with a counterpart to other historical (and some non-historical) founders of religions. The *Gâthâs*, it was decided, were his work and contained his teachings; the *Yasna Haptanghâiti* was the work of his more or less immediate followers; and the *Young Avesta* represented, on one hand, pre-Zoroastrian, “pagan,” beliefs and, on the other, a relapsed and corrupt form of Zarathustra’s teachings.

The Avestan texts were first written down about the fifth century C.E. and the Pahlavi texts in the ninth-tenth centuries C.E., but both are now only known from manuscripts dating from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries.

3.1.1. Contents of the Avesta

According to the tradition, under Khosrow (531-79 C.E.), the Avesta was divided into 21 books, or *nasks*, the contents of which are given in the *Dênkard*, a Pahlavi text compiled in the ninth century. From this it appears that only one of the books have been preserved virtually complete: the *Videvdad*; of most of the others only smaller or larger parts are now extant. The loss of so much of the Sasanian Avesta since the ninth century must be ascribed to the effect of the difficulties that beset the Zoroastrian communities after the Muslim conquest of Iran.

The *Avesta* is traditionally divided into several parts (details see \$\$):

The *Yasna* (Y.) A miscellany of texts recited during the *yasna* ritual, among which are.

The *Yashts* (Yt.): collection of hymns to individual deities.

The *Khorda Avesta* (KhA.) “little *Avesta*”: a miscellany of hymns and other ritual texts for common use.

The *Niyâyishns* (Ny.) “prayers” to the sun, Mithra, the moon, Ardwâ Sûrâ Anâhitâ (the waters), Âtash Bahrâm (the fire).

The *Videvdad* (V.) (also *Vendidad*) literally “the law(s) or regulations (serving to keep) the demons away.” mainly a collection of texts concerned with purification rituals. It also contains some mythological material.

The *Hâdôkht nask* (HN.): a text about the fate of the soul after death.

The *Êhrbedestân* and the *Nîrangestân* (N.): religious legal texts.

¹ In the extended *Videvdad sadeh* ritual, some parts of the *Yasna* are substituted by a set of texts called *Vispered* (Vr.) here the *Yasna Haptanghâiti* is inserted also between the fourth and fifth *Gâthâs*.

² For a recent interpretation of these lists, see Witzel, 2000.

3.2. Non-Avestan texts

Sources for Zoroastrianism other than the Avesta comprise the following.

Achaemenid period (550-330 B.C.E.):

- the cuneiform inscriptions in Old Persian of the Achaemenid kings;
- various economical records in Elamite¹ and Aramaic found at Persepolis, capital of the Achaemenids;
- letters to and from a Jewish community at Elephantine (an island in the Nile) during the Achaemenid hegemony;
- references to Iranian religions by Greek authors;
- artistic and architectural remains.

Seleucid (305-247? B.C.E.) and Arsacid/Parthian (247? B.C.E. - 224 C.E.) periods:

- a few inscriptions, including on coins;
- references to Iranian religions by Greek, Roman, and Jewish authors;
- artistic and architectural remains.

Sasanian period (224-636 C.E.):

- royal and private inscriptions from the 3rd-4th centuries;
- other, especially funerary, inscriptions;
- coins and seals;
- texts in Middle Persian, the “Pahlavi books.”
- artistic and architectural remains.

3.2.1 The Achaemenid period

The Achaemenid kings describe in their inscriptions how they sacrificed to Ahura Mazdā and fought against the Lie and altogether endeavored to be good Zoroastrians.

The official records in Elamite from the palaces at Persepolis contain religious terminology in connection with provisions for sacrifices.

The Aramaic texts from Persepolis contain inventories of implements used in the haoma sacrifices: pestles and mortars

The letters from Egypt, written in the fifth century B.C.E., contain theophoric names, that are clearly Zoroastrian.

The writings of Greek (later also Roman) historians and philosophers sometimes describe Iranian religious practices or make various references to them.

3.2.2. The Seleucid and Arsacid/Parthian periods

The most important sources are the writings of Greek and Roman historians who write about the wars between the Romans and Iranians.

Among archeological remains, those at Nimrud Dagh stand out. This was built by Antioch (Antiochos) King of Commagene (69-34 B.C.E.), a kingdom north of Antioch, modern Antakya in eastern Turkey.

3.2.3. The Sasanian period: inscriptions

Several inscriptions from the 3rd cent. C.E. have survived, in which religious matters are touched upon or described in great detail and are our main sources for Iranian religion from this period.

In the inscription of Shāpūr I (242-72), engraved on a tower-like building at Naqsh-e Rostam in front of the tombs of Darius and other Achaemenid kings, we are told at length how Shāpūr successfully fought off three attacks by Roman

¹ A language written in cuneiform script, used by the pre-Iranian rulers of southwestern Iran. It is unrelated to other known languages from the area.

emperors, expanding his own empire considerably in the process. We are then told in great detail how he arranged for religious ceremonies to be performed for his royal relatives.

The most remarkable inscriptions from this period are those of the high priest Kerdîr (also written Kirdêr, Kartîr, etc.), who probably served under six Sasanian kings: Shâpûr, Ohrmazd I (272-73), Wahrâm I (273-76), II (276-93), III (293), and perhaps Narseh (293-302). In his inscriptions, Kerdîr describes, on the one hand, his career, and, on the other hand, how his double traveled into the beyond during a kind of seance to see with his own eyes that their religious teachings were indeed true.

Finally, in the inscription of Narseh, we catch a glimpse of the royal ideology toward the end of the 3rd century.

There are hundreds of seals inscribed in Middle Persian, providing titles of religious officials and other religious information. Magical seals and bowl inscriptions are also found. The main problem: absence of dating.

3.3. The Pahlavi texts

Most of the extant Pahlavi texts were probably compiled in the 9th century, although parts of them must have been composed much earlier, even as early as the 3rd century. The corpus can roughly be divided into three categories:

- translations of Avestan texts;
- texts with religious contents, sometimes incorporating translations from the extant or lost Avesta;
- secular texts.

Translations have been preserved of most of the Avestan texts (referred to as the Pahlavi *yasna*, Pahlavi *Videvdad*, etc.), with the important exception of some of the *yashts*. All the translations contain glosses and commentaries, especially the Pahlavi *Videvdad*, which incorporates lengthy legalistic discussions.

Among the religious texts, the *Dênkard* and the *Bundahishn* stand out as veritable encyclopedias of Zoroastrian religion, but there are numerous other important texts, as well.

A special category are the collections of letters exchanged between the Zoroastrians in Iran and those in India (Parsis).¹ Two collections exist, one in Pahlavi and one in Persian.

Secular texts include a text on how to write letters, a poem of a verbal competition between a date palm and a goat, and various other texts.

3.4. The Manichean literature

Another source for early Sasanian religion is the Manichean literature, which contains numerous elements taken over from Zoroastrianism. Also, the Manichean church history overlaps with the 3rd- and 4th-century Sasanian history and provides some details.

These texts can be used, but with caution, as the teachings adopted from other religions were adapted by Mani and his followers to their own concept of the world.

4. ORIGINS OF IRANIAN RELIGION

The Indo-Europeans: their language and religion

The second approach to the origin of the Iranians is through their languages. To understand this approach, some historical background is required.

In the 17th century, European scholars had begun to notice that foreign languages, recorded primarily by missionaries, exhibited some curious similarities, and, in the first half of the 18th century, these similarities became the object of systematic research to discover their reasons. At this time, the Tower of Babel scenario was being

¹ In the face of pressure from the Muslim conquerors of Iran, a group of Zoroastrians emigrated to the west coast of India in the tenth century, founding what later became known as the Parsi (Parsee) community there; see Boyce, 1979, pp. 166-68.

increasingly abandoned, according to which all languages are descended from Hebrew, which was the language of Adam, etc., and so a different reason had to be sought. What scholars came up with, was an origin in the languages of the three sons of Noah, who had survived the flood and settled in different parts of the world. It was from their languages that the languages of the modern world had developed into three different language families: the Semitic from Shem, the Hamitic from Ham, and the Japhetic from Japhet. the Semitic languages comprised Hebrew and Arabic and various others; among the Hamitic languages were Egyptian and Coptic; and the Japhetic languages were the rest, among them the European languages, but also the languages of Asia.

This large group of Japhetic languages was further identified with the Scythian and Sarmatian languages, which according to the Greek historians were spoken north of the Black Sea and the Caucasus (not far from where the Ark landed on Mt. Ararat), and it was thought that both the European and the Asian languages were descended from them.

During the 18th century, however, it became increasingly clear that it was possible to compare languages and determine their precise genetic relationships to each other. This was developed into a science, which was called comparative linguistics, and, in particular, comparative Indo-European¹ linguistics, because it comprised most of the languages between India and the western edge of Europe.

One important impetus for the new science was the discoveries of the ancient Indic and Iranian languages and literatures in the 17-18th centuries. The result, as presented in several comprehensive, multi-volume descriptions in the mid- and late 18th century, was that the Indo-Germanic language family comprised most of the European languages, as well as several Asian ones, notably, Celtic, Germanic, Slavic, Italic, Greek, Armenian, Iranian, and Indic. The oldest of these were the Indic and the Iranian with their *Vedas* and *Avesta*, with Greek with its Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as a runner-up.

Scholars in the twentieth century compared the Old Iranian religion with that of the Indo-Aryans in an attempt to recover common Indo-Iranian beliefs. Attempts were also made to isolate comparable data throughout the Indo-European literatures to identify elements that might be ascribed to the remote ancestors of all the Indo-European peoples, the proto-Indo-Europeans. By this research, it was established that the proto-Indo-Europeans sacrificed² to heavenly gods, denoted by the word **deiwo*, known in a variety of Indo-European languages: Old Indic *deva*, Avestan *daēwa* and Old Persian *daiva*, Latin *deus*, Old Norse *Tyr*, contained in the day name (Norwegian) *tys-dag* “Tues-day,” plural *tivar*. This word was in turn related to another word, **dyew*, denoting the bright sky, which was probably worshipped as a high god by several Indo-European peoples: Old Indic *dyau* “heaven” and *dyāus pitā* “father heaven,” Avestan *dyao* “heaven,” Latin *Juppiter* from the vocative **dyeu-pater* “O father heaven,” Greek *Zeus* from **dyēus*.

Most divine names differ in the various languages, however, and comparative religion and mythology has concentrated on the *functions* of gods and mythical characters to establish deeper relationships. This tendency for names to differ in the various traditions can be seen even in closely related, notably the Indo-Iranian, ones.

The Indians and their religion

As the corpus of Old Indic texts, the *Rigveda* and the other *Vedas* and the somewhat later *Brahmanas*, is much more voluminous than the *Old and Young Avesta*, the Old Indic religion is also much better known. The Rigvedic religion is a polytheistic religion, populated by a variety of gods – *devas* and *asuras* – to whom worship and sacrifices are offered. There are, on the one hand, the two high *asuras*, Varuṇa and Mitra, both of whom watch over the cosmic Order (Old Indic *rta*); on the other hand, there are a number of *devas*, including Indra, the warrior god who, together with his companions, the Maruts, gods of winds and rains, releases the heavenly waters, allowing them to fertilize the world;

¹ It was actually called Indo-Germanic at the time, when most studies were in German.

² The term *sacrifice* is used throughout this introduction without necessarily implying *immolation* of a sacrificial victim; rather it is used to denote ritual offerings to gods and other entities in the divine world. See, e.g., Henninger, 1987, esp. pp. 544-45. The Avestan verb implies worship of the gods, consecration of the elements of the ritual, and the offering up the elements of the ritual to the gods as gifts.

Agni, the fire god, materialized in the sacrificial and heavenly fires; Vâyu, the god of the intermediate space between heaven and earth; Apâm napât, Scion of the Waters, the fire in the heavenly waters; and Soma, the divine plant and drink prepared in the sacrifice and offered to the gods to replenish their cosmic creative powers. Beside these, a multitude of other divine beings are made the target of worship and sacrifices, among them the heavenly waters, the couple heaven and earth, dawn and the sun, and others, among them a number of deified “abstract” concepts. They all contribute to the rejuvenation of the world, the ordered cosmos, maintaining it full of light, life, and fertility and protecting it from darkness and death.

The principle of the ordered cosmos is again Order, characterized by light and life, but which is regularly replaced by darkness and chaos. The cover of darkness is sometimes said to be that of the lie (*druh*, e.g., Rigveda 7, 75, 1). The sacrifices offered to the deities, serve to aid the gods in re-establishing Order after periods of chaos.

5. FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF ZOROASTRIANISM

The religious thought of the ancient Iranians is based on the opposition between order and chaos, good and bad, truth and falsehood, as manifested in the thought, speech, and activity of gods and men.

Many aspects of the earliest beliefs of the Iranians can be retrieved from the *Avesta* and the Old Persian inscriptions, supplemented by information provided by the Greek authors, while later beliefs are spelled out in greater detail in the Pahlavi texts (for instance, in the *Bundahishn*, the “establishment in the beginning”). The following is an overview based primarily on the Avestan texts.

5.1. The poet-sacrificer's thought

The large number of words derived from the verb *man-* “think, remember,” etc., and other terms denoting some kind of mental activity is one of the most striking features of the Old Avestan poems.

The term (*vohu*) *manah* “(good) thought” is one of the most frequent in all the *Gâthâs* (in third place after *Ahura Mazdâ* and *asha*, according to Kellens-Pirart) and is clearly at the center of the poet's world, being, as we shall see, the guiding principle of words and actions and, therefore, that of the poet-sacrificer, for which he is rewarded.

To understand the profound significance and meaning of this term, we need only consider what takes place in the thought of the poet: it is where all of the oral poet's knowledge about the cosmos and the ritual is stored. Thus the poet-sacrificer's “good thought” is the prerequisite for a good ritual, including good songs of praise, as in 1.30.1 “the praises and sacrificial (actions/utterances) of (my) good thought.” Most importantly, his thought/mind is necessarily where and that by which the oral poet composes his poems.

Thus, to the Avestan poet his thought must have been his most treasured asset. It was therefore quite appropriate that *Ahura Mazdâ*'s abode, the House of Song, should also be called the House of Good Thought (1.32.15), that is, the house of the being with the best thought of all, namely *Ahura Mazdâ*, but also the house of those who have the good thought = poetic competence required to compose the songs of praise that fill it! This role of the poet's thought was seen clearly by Paul Thieme:

... fundamentally every song is artistic poetry and pretends to be valued as such. It is the result of a long education (about which the *rsis* reveal as little as the Homeric singers) and supreme concentration of the thoughts, which the poets achieve with ascetic exercises and a certain exuberance which they often help out with the use of stimulants (*soma*), if we are to believe their words. One should try to imagine oneself in the situation of illiterate people and imagine how they must have struggled to force their thoughts into the metrical forms of spoken language, while following the unwritten rules of a standard language lacking the support of a written language, and finally to

maintain it all in one's mind. Need we wonder that they call their formulations god-given and that they glorify the action of forming itself as a divine, god-performed.¹

According to the Avestan texts, at the beginning of time, Ahura Mazdā formed his thought into the words of the *Ahuna Vairiya* prayer, which he recited and thereby stunned and incapacitated the Evil Spirit (Pahlavi Ahrimen or the Foul Spirit). He then “created,” that is, thought forth, engendered, and/or expertly fashioned (as a master artisan) and then ordered the world so that it contained no evil elements: no darkness, disease, death, or deception, but instead was full of light, life, and fertility.

The *manyu* “inspiration, spirit”

The Old Avestan *manyu* plays a crucial role in the Zoroastrian myths. It is a violent and dominating mental force, good or bad, that grasps and carries along gods and humans by its own will. It may be translated as “mental impulse” or “mental force,” but the intrinsic meaning, on the whole, I think is close to “(poetic/religious) inspiration.”

In the later texts, the term refers to the two original creative forces of the universe: the Life-giving Spirit (*spenta manyu*) and the Evil (Destructive) Spirit (*angra manyu*).

Performance and audience.

Another point that needs to be kept in mind is that, as oral poetry, our text was by necessity performed to an audience. That is, they are poems spoken to be heard. While the poets expression of the poems was purely oral, the audience's perception of them was exclusively aural, hence the insistence on “speaking,” “hearing,” and “making heard” in the poems. An especially important function is that assumed by the root *srao-*, which in its various forms, in addition to conveying the notion of “hearing.” The performer makes the poems heard (*srâwaya-*), and the audience (human or divine) hears them (or not). Similarly, the performer himself “is heard,” as are the poems and, also, everything in the poetic tradition, such as the myths told by the singers, which have been heard, that is, through the performances of poets and story-tellers only.

5.2. The world

Order (*asha*)

Ahura Mazdā's world was ordered according to the principle of (micro/macro)cosmic Order (Avestan *asha*),² which is manifested in the light of day, the diurnal sky, and the sun. Along with the poet-sacrificer's thought, this is the single most important concept in the old Indo-Iranian poetry and its mythical world of reference. In this introduction, the term is render as “Order” and its derivatives accordingly: *ashawan* “sustainer of Order” (“detainer or upholder of Order” is also possible). The “Order” probably originated by a “thought” of Ahura Mazdā's and was imposed on the cosmos by him when it was first established. It was also Ahura Mazdā who, by his thought, made the luminous spaces of Order, which are the bright diurnal sky. In fact, Order *contains* the sun (1.32.2), and in the Young Avesta, the sun is said to be Ahura Mazdā's eye. Ahura Mazdā is said to be the father of Order, and he *upholds* it.

The term *asha* thus has three fundamental references in the Old Avestan texts:

1. The cosmic Order, including the Order of nature and mankind.
2. The visible aspect of Order, that is the diurnal sky, heaven, and the lights of heaven, the most significant feature of which is the sun; any communication between the divine and human spheres must necessarily travel through this space.
3. The Order is also that of the ritual, that is of the ritual actions and words, as well as of the thoughts of the poet-sacrificer, which are materialized in his poems.

¹ P. Thieme, “Brâhman,” ZDMG 102, 1952, pp. 91-129 (= *Kleine Schriften*, Wiesbaden, I, 1984, pp. 113-14).

² This word is rendered as “truth” by some authors, but Iranists tend to use “order.” I discuss the arguments for one or the other in Skjærvø, 2003, “Truth and Deception.”

INTRODUCTION TO ZOROASTRIANISM

It has been common practice to translate *asha* (*rta*) as “truth,” but in the *Avesta* and later texts *asha* (and later forms) is never used in expressions such as “speak the truth.”

The (new) world/existence (*ahu*)

To the Old Iranian poet-sacrificer existence is divided into different types of “states” of existence. In time there are three: the first; the current (with its past, present, and future); and the last states. In space there are two: that “with bones” or that “of living beings,” which is that of man, the world in which we live, and that “of the thought,” which is that in which the gods and the dead dwell. All these states of can be “good” or “bad.”

The first good existence is the state of the Ordered cosmos, while the first bad existence corresponds to the first Attack, as described in 1.29.

The last existence, as related in the Old *Avesta*, refers to the dead, who will go to a good (the best) or a bad (the worst) existence, in accordance with their behavior in the world. Both the first and the last existences are unique (*aēwa*- 1.29.6), as opposed to the past, present and future ones of (mankind), which are recurring phenomena.

The poet-sacrificer and his people are in charge of these recurring existences, their “job” being to make each and every one of them be like the good first existence. Their rivals and adversaries, on the other hand, are responsible for the decline—the sickening and destruction—of each of the present existences, thus making the regeneration and revitalization of the existence necessary.

The two worlds

The ordered world is divided into two spheres: *the world (existence) of thought* and *the world with bones* or *the world (existence) of living beings*. The world of thought contains what humans can only apprehend by thought, while that of living beings contains what can be apprehended by means of the senses (seeing, hearing, feeling).

Zoroastrianism is therefore characterized by a double duality: between the original good and evil principles and between the “created” worlds of thought and living beings.

The principle of Order applies to both the world of thought and that of living beings. In the former it applies to the cosmic processes, established and upheld by Ahura Mazdā; in the latter it applies to the behavior of men, both in daily life and in the ritual. All entities in the universe, including mankind, that conform to this principle are said to be “sustainers of Order” or “Orderly” for short (*ashawan*).¹

Note: the two worlds are sometimes called the “spiritual and material” worlds, but these terms are relatively modern, have many different and partly very misleading implications, and should be avoided.

The struggle

The primordial chaos regularly (at night, in winter) re-enters Ahura Mazdā’s ordered cosmos, however, and the ordering process has to be repeated. It is the duty of humans to assist Ahura Mazdā in this process, especially the “poet-sacrificers,” who compose the hymns and perform the rituals. Thus, the texts present us with a world view organized about the eternal battle between the forces of order (championing light, life, fertility), represented by the high god Ahura Mazdā, “the all-knowing ruler,” and his fellow deities, and the forces of chaos (producing darkness, death, and barrenness), represented by the cosmic Deception, or Lie (see below), and its various agents.

Ahura Mazdā’s companions include the six “Life-giving Immortals” and great gods, such as Mithra, the sun god, and others (see below).

The forces of evil comprise, notably, Angra Manyu, the Evil Spirit, the bad, old, gods (*daēwas*), and Wrath (*aēshma*), which probably embodies the dark night sky itself.

¹ In (Zoroastrian) Persian this became *ashō*, which is the form commonly used by Parsis (*ashō Zardosht*). The Old Persian form is *artāwan*, which became (Zoroastrian) Persian *ardā*.

Zoroastrianism is therefore a dualistic and polytheistic religion, but with one supreme god,¹ who is the father of the ordered cosmos.

Truth and reality (*haithya*)

In a universe in which the two opposing powers of good and evil, truth and lies, constantly vie for supremacy, the average human being is constantly prone to being misled as to what is right behavior, and the poet-sacrificer, even, is not exempt of this weakness. His concept of reality, that is, what “really, truly is” (Av. *haithya*, OInd. *satya*) as formed by observing the sensory data of nature and the inherited knowledge of his trade can still be wrong, and although he knows—he thinks—what is real, the danger of delusions caused by the powers of the Lie is ever-present. Therefore, he must always take precautions when conducting the ritual, to prevent any potential damage caused by a misunderstanding or error in his knowledge. The precautions can only be of a verbal nature and consist either in set “safety clauses” inserted in the verbal part of the ritual or in questions about what is “real.”²

The Lie (*druj*)

The adversary of the Ordered cosmos is the cosmic Deception, or Lie (Avestan *druj*, Old Persian *drauga*). Descriptions of various aspects or manifestations of the Lie found in the texts help define it. The origin of the Lie is not stated explicitly, but it must have come into “existence” the first time somebody thought or uttered the proposition that Ahura Mazdā’s Order is not the true Order. It must therefore “logically” have happened after the establishment of the first Ordered cosmos, that is, during the first state, causing its “sickening” and “destruction.” It is tempting to identify this first Lie with the choice of the *daēwas* described in 1.30.6.

The domain of the Evil Spirit was ruled by the principle of Deception (*druj*), by which one may be confused as to the true nature of the world and fail to make the right choices about whom to ally oneself with: the forces of good or those of evil. According to the *Old Avesta*, this is what happened to the old gods, the *daēwas*, who were confused and made the wrong choices (1.30.6), and, according to Darius’s inscriptions, this was also what happened to his political adversaries (e.g., DB 4.33-36). Zoroastrianism shares with the Old Indic religion this concept of cosmic Order, which regularly has to be re-established with the help of sacrifices performed by humans.

The “models” (*ratus*)

A link is provided between beings in the worlds of thought and living beings in that all objects in the latter have a model or prototype (Avestan *ratu*) in the world of thought, a category of entities reminiscent of the Platonic *ideas*. Thus, the divisions of the year, which recur ever anew, all have their unchanging Models in the world of thought, and Ahura Mazdā (or other gods) fashioned a prototypical man, cow/bull, year, and so on, to be the blueprints, as it were, for men, animals and the divisions of time in the world of living beings.³ Altogether there are thirty-three Models connected with the *haoma* ritual (see the litanies in Yasna 1 and 6).

The concept expressed by the word *ratu* is closely connected with Order and is perhaps linguistically related to *asha* (OInd. *rta*).⁴ “Artistically,” I think we may imagine Order as a vast network or web of harmonious relationships, in which the “nodes” are the *ratus*, the divine models or prototypes “dominating” all phenomena in the world of the living, or, “scientifically,” as a 4-dimensional space where the *ratus* are the coordinates of objects in time and space. Combining this with etymology, we may note that Latin *artus* is a “joint,” a “node, nexus” about which a system is articulated.

¹ Such systems are also called *henotheistic*.

² To say “speak the truth” the Old Iranians used words meaning “straight” versus “crooked,” originally the characteristics of paths.

³ The Avestan *ratus* are therefore in some ways related to later philosophical concepts such as Plato’s *ideas*.

⁴ Etymologically it is presumably related to Old Indic *rtu*, whose meaning became specialized as “right moment.”

5.3. The Gods

Ahura Mazdâ.

Ahura Mazdâ, by his thought (and words and actions) first ordered the cosmos and still upholds the true/real cosmic Order, the visible image of which is the day-lit sky with the sun as its center piece. Ahura Mazdâ is also the one who engendered many of the elements in the cosmos, and he is its ruler. His two epithets, *ahura* and *mazdâ*, which also make up his name, refer to these functions.

In the *Gâthâs*, these epithets are still independent of one another, although either of them is likely to be followed by the other in the same strophe. In the *Young Avesta*, Ahura Mazdâ is clearly the name of the divinity, and whether there still was a feeling for what the words originally meant is uncertain. By the Achaemenid period the univerbation process was complete, and the name appeared as Ahuramazdâ, which in turn became Parthian and Middle Persian Ôhrmazd, Ôhrmezd, and, still later, Hormazd.¹

Ahura Mazdâ is closely associated with the six “Life-giving Immortals.” These were originally parts of Ahura Mazdâ’s sacrifice, but then became deities in their own right. They are still more complex entities, however, as they also represent parts of the cosmos and serve as “guardians” of things in this world.

The Life-giving Immortals

No gods other than Ahura Mazdâ are mentioned by name in the *Gâthâs* and the *Yasna Haptanghâiti*, but Airyaman is invoked in the *Ā Airyamâ ishiyô* prayer (5.54.1), which concludes the *Gâthâ* collection,² and several physical entities are invoked as divinities in the *Yasna Haptanghâiti*, among them the heavenly fire and the heavenly waters. Instead, in the *Old Avesta*, we find a number of concepts with divine status that we would term “abstract” (human senses, emotions, etc.).³ Sometimes referred to as “entities,” these include:

vohu/vahishta manah “good/best thought”
asha (vahishta) “(best) order”
khshathra (vairiya) “(choice/well-deserved) command”
(spentâ) ârmaiti “(life-giving) humility”
haurvatât “wholeness”
amertatât “non-dyingness” (not dying before one’s time)
âtar, the fire
sraosha “readiness to listen” (men to gods, gods to men)
airyaman, god of harmonic unions and healing
ashi “(heavenly) reward”

In the *Young Avesta*, the first six constitute a fixed series: Vohu Manah, Asha Vahishta, Khshathra Vairiya, Spentâ Armaiti, Haurvatât and Amertatât; Sraosha is a warrior god whose assigned task is to protect Ahura Mazdâ’s creation against the forces of darkness, especially Wrath (*Yasna* 57), and presides over the punishment of sin in the hereafter; and Ashi a goddess who protects Zarathustra in his battle with the Evil Spirit (*Yasht* 17).

Prefixed by Ahura Mazdâ, this group of “entities” constituted the seven *amesha spentas*, the seven “Life-giving Immortals,” one of the corner-stones of post-Gathic Zoroastrianism. Of these, Armaiti, daughter and wife of Ahura

¹ In eastern Iran, the name continued to be associated with the sun and even came to mean “sun” after foreign religions had dethroned the Zoroastrian supreme deity: in Buddhist Khotan *urmaysde* means “sun,” and so does Choresmian *rêmazd* and modern Sanglechi *remozd* in the Muslim period.

² For this reason scholars have been reluctant to assign it to the Old Avesta and ascribe it to Zarathustra. Boyce, for instance, does not join them, however, and assumes that both the *Ahuna Vairiya*, which introduces the *Gâthâ* collection, and the *Ā Airyamâ ishiyô* were composed by Zarathustra.

³ In India we find similar deities, e.g., Aryaman, god of harmonic unions; Bhaga, the distributor, that is, of appropriate shares of rewards; Purandhi, goddess of plenty = *pârendi* in the **YH**.

Mazdâ, is also the genius of the Earth, a connection that is Indo-Iranian.

Good Thought (*vohu manah*, Pahlavi Wahman)

The most frequent of all the derivatives of the verb *man-* is *manah* “mind, thought,” and especially *vohu manah* “good mind, good thought.” One of the functions of the thought is, apparently, as “receptacle” of the inspiration (*manyu*, see above). Thus, once he has obtained the inspiration, the poet will question or converse with his good thought to find the knowledge now contained therein about how to perform his ritual and will then no doubt interpret it, that is, decide what it means and how to use it. During this questioning and consultation, by virtue of his “readiness to listen,” the poet will then hear the “announcements” of Ahura Mazdâ:

In the Old Avestan creation myth, Good Thought also appears to represent the covering of the day sky, which is stretched out by the poet-sacrificers. In the Young Avestan texts, Good Thought can also be used to refer to a living being, and in the Pahlavi texts Wahman is said to be the protector of animals.

Best Order (*asha vahishta*, Pahlavi Ardwahisht, Ashwahisht)

Thought (forth) and engendered by Ahura Mazdâ, this is the cosmic Order imposed on the universe by Ahura Mazdâ through his primordial sacrifice and constantly renewed by him with the help of human sacrifices. One of the most sacred prayers in Zoroastrianism is the following:

Order is the best good (reward/possession) there is.
There are wished-for things in the wish for this one
when one's Order is for the best Order.

What this prayer says, is that the sacrificer's (and every human's) duty is to support Ahura Mazdâ's Order. When the order of the sacrifice (and the correct behavior of humans) regenerates Ahura Mazdâ's Order, chasing evil, this will be their best reward.

In the Old Avestan cosmological myth, Order also refers to the sun and the heavenly spaces illuminated by the sun. In the Pahlavi texts Ardwahisht is said to be the protector of humans.

The Choice/Well-deserved Command (*khshathra vairiya*, Pahlavi Shahrewar)

The Command is, more precisely, the ruling power, the power of command possessed by a general who leads his forces against an adversary. It was by his original command that Ahura Mazdâ first defeated Evil, and the sacrificer, having obtained the command by a successful sacrifice, is able to overcome his competitors and transfers the command to Ahura Mazdâ, who thereby again overcomes death and darkness and produces life and light and fertility for the earth/Ârmaiti and a good reward for his followers.

In the Old Avesta, the Command is also closely associated with Ârmaiti, in which case it may refer specifically to human rulers who keep enemies and other scourges away from the land, maintaining a state of peace and prosperity.

The bad poet-sacrificers use their twisted command to make the evil state return and to maintain lack of peace and prosperity.

In the Young Avestan texts, Well-deserved Command can also be used to refer to metal tools, and in the Pahlavi texts Shahrewar is said to be the protector of metals.

Life-giving Humility (*spentâ ârmaiti*, Pahlavi Spandârmad)

Ârmaiti, Humility, is the daughter of Ahura Mazdâ. Already in the Old Avestan texts, she is clearly the deity of the Earth, as she is in the later Avestan texts and in several other Old Iranian mythologies (Persian, Sogdian, Khotanese). She is therefore the counterpart of the celestial Order, with which she is frequently associated, and this couple therefore corresponds loosely to the Old Indic couple Heaven and Earth.

If *ârmaiti* is, as always assumed, derived from the verb *aram man-*, it must literally mean “thinking in correct measure, balanced thinking,” as opposed to “too much” or “too little,” as implied by its opposite “thinking beyond its measure,” especially “think (too) little (about), scorn.”¹ More probably, its meaning is “humility” and refers to the earth’s “humble” role as the daughter and spouse of Ahura Mazdâ.² Note that *humble* is from Latin *humilis*, which is derived from *humus* “earth.” Hence the ritual action of “homage” (*nemah*), that is, bending down to the earth, is regularly associated with Ârmaiti.

Wholeness and Non-dyingness (*haurwatât* and *amertatât*, Pahlavi *Hordad* and *Amurdad*)

These two refer to the fact of not having defects and blemishes and not dying before one’s time. They represent the desired state of the world and are generated by the sacrifice.

In both the Old and Young Avestan texts, they can be used to refer to water and plants, whose protectors they are said to be in the Pahlavi texts.

Fire (*âtar*, Pahlavi *âdur* and *âtash*)

The sacrificial fire, belongs to Ahura Mazdâ (in the Young Avesta it is the son of Ahura Mazdâ), the messenger who goes between the worlds of thought and of living beings, bringing the offerings of the worshiper to the gods and the gifts of the gods to the worshiper (see on the Ritual).

Other gods

In the *Young Avesta*, sacrifices and worship are offered to a number of deities, among them Mithra, the sun god; Anâhitâ, the heavenly river; Vayu, the god of the intermediate space between the spherical heaven and the earth suspended in its center; Tishtriya, the Dog Star, who fights the demon of Drought to release the rains; etc. On these see below.

Evil gods and demons

Ahura Mazdâ’s opponents are the cosmic Deception, or the Lie (*drug, druj*), and her principal agent, the Evil Spirit (*Angra Manyu*, literally, “the dark, black spirit/inspiration”?), whose creations and followers tell lies about Ahura Mazdâ and his Ordered universe. They are therefore said to be “filled with/possessed by the Lie, Lieful,” (*drug-want*). When Ahura Mazdâ established the Ordered universe, sunny and healthy, the Evil Spirit in turn polluted it with all kinds of evil things, darkness, death, sickness, etc.

The agents of the Evil Spirit are the old (Indo-Iranian) gods, the *daêwas*, or demons (OPers. *daiva*, OInd. *deva*). These are the old Indo-Iranian (and Indo-European) celestial gods, who were demoted in Iran, where they were assigned to the world governed by the Lie. In the myth, their demotion was caused by their making the wrong choices.³

This feature in particular distinguishes Zoroastrianism from Indic (and Indo-European) beliefs, and the fact that the Avestan *daêwas* and Old Persian *daivas* are no longer beneficent heavenly beings, but rather the agents of chaos, deception, and evil, has been explained by scholars variously. Most commonly, it has simply been assumed that the reversal of the fortunes of the *daêwas* was the work of a single man and due to a conscious and planned departure from earlier beliefs. That man, they decided, must have been Zarathustra, and the “new” beliefs must have been part of his “reform” of the traditional religion. See below on Zarathustra.

Others are:

Aêshma “Wrath,” the principal opponent of Sraosha; he probably personifies nocturnal darkness and the night sky,

¹ According to Louis Renou, Rigvedic *aramati* is literally “thought put in correct form, thought ready (for the poetic games)” but also a deity. Its “abstract” meaning is therefore closely connected with poems and poetry.

² See Skjærvø, 2002, “Ahura Mazdâ and Ârmaiti.”

³ In the Rigveda *deva* is a term applied to most gods, including those who are also called *asura*.

and his “bloody club” may refer to the sunset, in which the sun seems to be sinking into blood. Nasu, the Carrion demoness, the greatest polluter of Ahura Mazdâ’s world. Bushyanstâ, the demoness of sloth, with long fingers, who keeps telling men “there will be another (day)” and not to bother to get up in the morning to do Ahura Mazdâ’s work.

In the Pahlavi texts, the *dêws* (from *daêwa*) and *druzes* (from *druj*) are male and female demons.

5.4. *Mankind*

Both Ahura Mazdâ and the Evil Spirit have their agents among the humans. Ahura Mazdâ’s principal agent, the first human to “praise Order,” to “discard the *daêwas*” as not worthy of sacrifice, and to “sacrifice to Ahura Mazdâ” was Zarathustra, the first human poet-sacrificer. Later poet-sacrificers imitate Zarathustra in order to perform a successful sacrifice. Zarathustra’s primary adversaries in the *Gâthâs* are the *kawis* and *karpans* (Pahlavi *kaygs* and *karbs*) “poetasters and mumblers(?)”

Duality and choices

The cosmic duality as reflected in mankind manifests itself through man’s choices as regards his thoughts, words, and acts. The sustainer of Order will think good thoughts, speak good words, and do good deeds, the one possessed by the Lie will think evil thoughts, speak evil words, and do evil deeds.

Here we have to be cautious not to identify these terms with those of modern religions, such as Christianity, with which the Old Avestan concepts only partly overlap. In the Old Avestan religion “good thought,” etc., means exactly “thought which is in conformity with Order,” and “evil thought,” etc., means “thought which is opposed to good thought, which is in conformity with the Lie.”

The “established rules/laws” (*dâta*) and the “deals” (*urwata*)

Once he has chosen his sides, the poet-sacrificer expects Ahura Mazdâ and the other divine beings to be on his side as well. This mutual dependency is well expressed by Darius, in his statement “I am Ahura Mazdâ’s, Ahura Mazdâ is mine.” The relationship between the poet-sacrificer and the divine world is regulated by the rules that obtain for the Ordered cosmos in general and which also regulate the natural cycles and social relationships. In this bipolar structure, which is valid for relations between the divine and human worlds, as well as among humans in society, both participants have their assigned job to do, and until the job is done they remain in debt to the other part. Thus the job is part of the elaborate system of gift exchange found in ancient and “primitive” societies and which has been identified and well studied for instance in the Greek and Old Indic literatures, but also in the wider Indo-European context.

The reciprocity of divine and human contributions to the maintenance and re-establishment of Order is governed by two sets of rules: the *dâtas*, the rules or laws (apparently) established by Ahura Mazdâ in his function as king for everybody to follow, and the *urwatas*, the deals between gods and gods, gods and men, or men and men, corresponding, respectively, to Rigvedic *dharman-* “upholding, (cosmic) rule” and *vrata-*.

While the *dâtas* are eternal established rules for behavior established by Ahura Mazdâ, the deals are eternal (OInd. *prathama-* “first, primeval”) conventions that regulate divine and human interaction to which both the divine and the human parts must conform. The *mithra* “contract,” on the other hand, seems to be a deal concluded between humans.

Rivalry and the social conflict.

In the society of our poet-sacrificer, the cosmic conflict translates into a number of oppositions, which we may characterize as those between rich and poor, strong and weak, patron and dependent, the poet-sacrificer and his rivals. In the Ordered cosmos, these two groups were created equal, as it were, in the mixed state, however, the rich and strong are often found to be possessed by the Lie, as are many of our poet-sacrificer’s colleagues. The paradox is that, by

everything he has been told, the poet-sacrificer knows that in the Order of things the cow and the pastures were made and assigned to the sustainers of Order (3.47.3), but in actual fact the poet and his people are—allegedly—constantly faced with the problem of the maldistribution of the means of production and wealth. Again and again he stresses that the sustainers of Order lack the means of subsistence, while the others have plenty.

This “social” aspect of the conflict, which pervades the Old Avestan texts, was emphasized by Antoine Meillet, who maintained that Zarathustra preached for the poor, the oppressed cattle-tenders.

The sustainers of Order are the men here and now who accept Ahura Mazdā and abide by his Order, as well as men of the past, among them heroes and poets, and men of the future, among them the future “revitalizers.” Their principal function is to uphold and maintain Order in the worlds of men and gods. The Lie, on the other hand, is served by the *daēwas* and men who are possessed by the Lie.

The poet-sacrificer and his people will repeatedly pray to Ahura Mazdā to be considered as belonging to the former group.

The criterion for classifying men and gods into one of these two groups is whether they are or act in conformity with the two sets of rules laid down by Ahura Mazdā, his established laws and the “deals.”

The opposition between Order and the Lie and sustainers of Order and those possessed by the Lie and the struggle to overcome the Lie and those possessed by it are the all-pervasive themes in the *Gāthās*, which is likely to be introduced at any point in the poem, with varying functions within the structure. Thus, the poet may first announce what he already knows about this matter, about the origin, present status, and end of the conflict and the participants; then he inquire about the same; and, finally, announce the fate of the competitors in the ritual competition.

There are three sub-themes of this general theme, namely the origin of the cosmic conflict, the origin and nature of the social conflict (including the ritual conflict), and the eschatological theme, which is closely connected with the themes of the *competition* and *chariot race* (see below).

In the larger social context, the enemies of the good are the rich and mighty who possess the things needed be the weak and poor, among whom our poet-sacrificer counts himself. More specifically, his direct enemies are his rival poet-sacrificers, as well as the patrons who do not pay him the salary they owe him. Both groups are criticized in the strongest terms in the *Gāthās*. The existence of numerous poet-sacrificers other than ours is made clear by plural references to “poets.” It follows logically that in a society where the poet-sacrificers vie for the attention, approval, and gifts of the gods, any other poet-sacrificer is bound to be a rival. That is not to say that they are all considered as bad, as well, but the absence of any mention of friendly poet-sacrificers leaves this point in darkness. The existence of other poets is well documented also from the Rigveda, in which it is commonly recognized that there are many, all of whom vie for the gods’ attention and favors.

In the *Gāthās*, as well, the rival poets “falsely” call themselves “poets” (*kawis*), and their patrons become possessed by the Lie and thereby ruin both the livelihood and the reputation of the real poets. The exigencies of the belly play an important role in the *Gāthās*, as we see from the emphasis on the kinds of food that are in store for the sustainers of Order and the Lie, respectively. See more on this issue below on the Poet’s Complaint and under Rewards.

There are several terms used for the rival or bad poet-sacrificers. Two of these have exact equivalents in Old Indic: *kawi* and *usij* ~ Old Indic *kavi* and *ushij*, while the others are only Old Avestan: *karpan* “*mumbler,” *grēhma* “*glutton,” *vaēpiya* “*trembler,” *kewīna* “*poetaster,” *bēndwa-* “*binder, tier (of knots?).”

The Old Indic term *kavi* is one of the commonest words for “poet,” and even in Old Avestan times it must have been a term of repute, as it is born by the famous *kawi Vishtāspa*. In fact, our text implies that it is the bad-poet-sacrificers who have given this term, as well as that of *karpan*, a bad name.

The cow

The cow plays an extremely important role in the world of the Old Avestan poet, as she represents his subsistence, providing many of the things necessary for his and his family’s survival, as well as for the ritual. Having many cows is a guarantee of well-being and a symbol of being favored by the gods. Hence, the object of revitalizing Ârmaiti, the

earth, is to ensure peace and pasture, without which no stable human community is possible.

The cow was created by Ahura Mazdā, but, as we are told in 1.29, no special *ratu* was provided for her within the original scheme of Order established during the first existence, hence she has no human protector and provider of forage, only the heavenly Ahura Mazdā himself. For this reason Zarathustra, Ahura Mazdā's favorite poet-sacrificer, is sent down among humans and is instituted as her master and protector and provider of forage.

According to the poet, the cow was thus created and intended for the sustainers of Order. Social disorder and conflict is therefore to a large extent apparently based upon the fact that those whom the poet considers to be possessed by the Lie are frequently those who actually own the most cows and controls the pastures. By these the cow is obviously mistreated, fettered, and even killed, as reflected in 1.29, 32.14 and in various YAv. text passages (Y.12.2, Yt.10.38, 86, V.3.11, 5.37, 18.12).

5.5. Man – body and soul

Man consists of a tangible body and various intangible parts, foremost among them the mind or thought. In the Old Avesta, two principal constituents of the body are “bones” and “life breath” or “vitality” (*ushtâna*).

Man also has three “souls”:

- the *frawashi* or “pre-soul,” which is made in the world of thought and preexists the person, being sent down to the world of the living when a person is conceived;
- the *urwan* or “(breath-)soul,” which leaves the body at death and wanders into the beyond to be judged;
- the *daênâ* or “vision-soul,” the mental constituent of man that allows him to “see” into the world of thought.

The *daênâ* also represents the totality of a persons thoughts, words, and deeds in life, for which he is judged in the beyond.

Avestan *daênâ*, Pahlavi *dên*, is often translated as “religion,” but we must keep in mind that “religion” can not have had the same implications in the early periods as it has in modern times.

The “Ford of the Accountant.”

According to the Old Avesta, “at the final turn of the existence,” each person is required to pass over the “Ford of the Accountant,” imagined as a passage across a river or a chasm, before which the register of one’s thoughts, words, and deeds is made. The soul (*urwan*) comes to this ford accompanied by the *daênâ*, which takes on an appearance congruent with the thoughts, words, and deeds it represents. In the later tradition, the thoughts, etc., are weighed on a scales by the heavenly judge, Rashnu, and according as the balance tips, the ford or bridge becomes wide or narrow, and the soul will pass safely on to heaven or fall into hell.

5.6. The (re)vitalization of the world

Healing of the cosmos

The Old Iranians viewed the natural processes of time—the change between day and night and summer and winter—as the result of a cosmic battle, fought between Ahura Mazdā and the Lie with the assistance of their divine and human followers. The battle was renewed every night and every winter, and its purpose was to reestablish the first state of the cosmos, that is, the way it was when Ahura Mazdā first ordered it. Since the daily and yearly changes cause nature to sicken (1.30.6) or be destroyed, what is clearly needed to remake the first existence is a good portion of healing and revitalizing/regenerating/reinvigorating strength.

The healing of the cosmos is also the purpose of the *videvdâd sâde* ritual.

The healing power of Ahura Mazdâ and the poet is referred to by the term “healer of (this) existence.”¹ The revitalizing strength, on the other hand, is the underlying theme of the entire Old Avestan text corpus and religion.

Swelling of the cosmos

When Ahura Mazdâ and the other immortal gods rule the world according to Order, it is full of life and fecundity. The terms for this state are derived from the root *span*, which literally implies “swelling with vital juices.” This may imply the conception of the world as “dried out, deflated,” like trees and plants and the ground itself during periods of non-growth, as opposed to periods of growth, when nature is reborn and swells with life-giving juices. Similarly, the female breast, deflated during periods of non-fecundity, is inflated with milk before and after birth and the male penis inflated before releasing its fertilizing semen.

The most important of these words are *spenta*, which is the epithet of everything that has (at least potentially) the power to “revitalize” the cosmos in this manner; *sawa(h)*, the “strength” by which the powers of darkness and death can be overcome and the revitalizing take place; and *saoshyant* “(he) who shall make (the existence) *spenta*, i.e., swell (with the Juices of Life),” that is, the competent and successful poet-sacrificer here and now, and (according to the *Young Avesta*) the various future mythical poet-sacrificers, notably the three sons of Zarathustra, who shall each of them sacrifice at the beginning of the last three millennia in order to reestablish the first state of existence permanently. In practice this refers to remaking the world in its pristine, unsullied form, as established and made in the beginning by Ahura Mazdâ.

The good deities in the world of thought, first of all Ahura Mazdâ, are all “life-giving, vitalizing” (*spenta*), that is, they are responsible for maintaining the universe in its pristine state, as originally established by Ahura Mazdâ himself. The term is frequently rendered in Western literature as “beneficial” or “holy,” but the latter is a very imprecise term and should be avoided. Humans contribute to this maintenance of the Ordered universe through their behavior and their rituals.

At the end of the final battle the final “life-givers” or “revitalizers” (*saoshyants*) will stand forth and by their victory over the forces of Evil render the world “juicy” (*frasha*), that is, full of fertile, juices, like it was in the beginning. In the *Gâthâs*, this adjective characterizes the supreme exchange gift produced by Ahura Mazdâ for a successful sacrifice, namely the remaking of the pristine state of the world. The event is also referred to as the “Juicy-making” (*frashô.kerti*), a term which later becomes reserved for the final event, at the end of the world, when Ahura Mazdâ performs the final sacrifice, producing the permanent “Juicy-making,” a state which is explained in Yt.19.11 as “incorruptible, indestructible, undecaying, unrotting, ever-living, ever-swelling.” The term is commonly rendered as “Renovation.” Here it is rendered as “Perfectioning.”

6. THE YOUNG AVESTAN GODS

While the Old Avestan texts mention few divine beings by names, the pantheon of the Young Avesta and the later texts is quite crowded with deities. All the beings of the world of thought are referred to as “deserving of sacrifices,” *yazata*, which becomes the regular term for “god.” The principal deities in the Young Avestan pantheon, other than Ahura Mazdâ are the following.

Ardwî Sûrâ Anâhitâ (*Pahlavi Ardwîsûr, Anâhîd*)

This is a female deity identified with the Heavenly River, that is, probably the Milky Way.

The goddess has her source on (the mythical) Mount Hukairyâ (“the mountain of good deeds”), whence she came down when Ahura Mazdâ asked her to. She is a fertility goddess and purifies the semen of the males and the wombs of the females so that they can conceive. Much of her *yasht* (Yt. 5) is devoted to the enumeration of her worshipers,

¹ It is, of course, this aspect of holiness that underlies the Germanic terms for “holy” (cf. *hale, whole*).

which will be discussed below. The rest is devoted to descriptions of the goddess. She is partly described as a river and partly as a richly dressed woman.

Mithra (OInd. Mitra, OPers. Mithra, Mitra; Pahlavi Mîhr)

A feature common to the Rigvedic Mitra and Avestan Mithra is that they are both concerned with the relationships between men. Thus Rigvedic Mitra is called “he who makes people take up their proper place.” The original function of Mitra may thus have been that of overseeing the agreements and treaties regulating the social and political relationships between groups of men. This function is not particularly prominent in the Rigvedic hymns but all the more so in the Avestan one. Here we find Mithra as the guardian of all kinds of agreements, concluded by all kinds of groups of people, social (homes, families) and political (tribes, countries). Mithra is the friend of the truthful and the sworn enemy of the untruthful who break the agreement. The sanctity of the contract even transcends the good-bad duality: in Yt. 10.2 a contract is said to be respected whether concluded with a sustainer of Order or someone possessed by the Lie!

To perform the function of overseer, Mithra never sleeps, has an inordinately large number of eyes and ears, and is able to survey vast areas.

On the other hand both Rigvedic Mitra and Avestan Mithra are associated with the sun. In the Rigveda, the sun is the eye of Mitra and Varuṇa, by which they keep an eye on the affairs of men. In the Avesta, Mithra precedes the Sun at dawn, flying over the golden mountain peaks to survey the land of the Iranians.

Mithra is the god invoked by warriors before the battles to make him strike fear into the hearts of the enemies, who are those who broke the peace treaty.

In the world of thought Mithra is the sworn enemy of the *daēwas* and others possessed by the Lie, and even the Evil Spirit himself fears him.

In the beginning, Ahura Mazdā assigned to Mithra a position as exalted as his own (Yt. 10.1). Mithra dwells on the top of Mount Harā in a house fashioned by Ahura Mazdā and the Life-giving Immortals, the mountain in the middle of the earth (around which the heaven rotates) and which is unsullied by evil (Yt. 10.59-51). When the sun rises, Mithra goes forth over Harā in front of the sun, surveying the Aryan lands and the Seven Continents (Yt. 10.12-16).

He drives in a chariot drawn by four white horses and is accompanied variously by Rashnu, Cistā, and the Likeness of the Mazdayasnian Daēnā (124-126). When he drives into battle he is accompanied by Rashnu, Sraosha, and Ashi, who acts as his charioteer (41), or Sraosha, Ashi, and Nairyō.sangha (52). Before him drives Verthraghna, the god who smashes the resistance/valor of the enemy, in the shape of a ferocious wild boar (his fifth incarnation) who wreaks havoc among the enemies who stand in his way.

Mithra supervises the contracts and the consequences of their breaking and keeping (2-3). He watches over the social order (17-21), as well as the political order (35-40). In general, he battles the powers of the Lie (95-98).

Ashi, goddess of the rewards, also Ashish Wanghwî “good Ashi” (Pahlavi Ahrishwang)

As the goddess of the personified “reward” she acts as charioteer of Zarathustra, a notion probably derived from the Gathic “poetic race for reward.” From there she also became the charioteer of the gods, notably Mithra. She wants excluded from her worship women not yet nubile, and like Anāhitā she is connected with the legends of the Naotairyas. The *yasht* to her (Yt. 17) contains an enumeration of her worshipers. The rest of the hymns contains descriptions of the goddess, an episode with Zarathustra and his fight with the Evil Spirit, and allusions to a myth involving the Naotairyas.

Haoma (Pahlavi Hôm)

The Rigvedic hymns to Soma primarily deal with the soma ritual and the effects upon the participants of the ritual who have drunk the soma juice. They feel uplifted, extremely strong, and immortal. The effect upon Indra himself is particularly potent: in one hymn (10.119) the god imagines himself larger than the sky and the earth, and deliberates with himself where he wants to set the earth down.

The Avestan hymn to Haoma is different. It is placed in the *Yasna* collection (Y. 9-11), as the pressing of the *haoma*-plant is an important part of the ceremony. Parts of the hymn itself are, in fact, reminiscent of the Rigvedic hymns to Soma. Thus, in Y. 9.17-21, the powers induced by the intoxicating drink are described, among which are victory in battles, bodily strength, and longevity.

Other parts, however, are linked with the mythological and legendary history of Iran. This is quite typical of Avestan hymns to deities. Thus, in Y. 9.1-13, the mythical sacrificers are listed, starting with Yima and ending with Zarathustra's father!

Other similarities between the Rigvedic Soma and the Avestan Haoma concern the description of the plant. The attempts at identifying the plant have created a lot of controversy, and no agreement has so far been reached. The problems connected with identifying the plant are indeed numerous. We must keep in mind that we are dealing with a mythical plant described by two different peoples living in two different places and probably changing habitats throughout the period during which the poems were composed. The identity of the plant may in fact have changed throughout the prehistoric period, as it has in historical times.

Haoma (Pers. Hûm) also entered the epic tradition (Yt. 9.16-19 = Yt. 17.36-39) as a hero who was granted the privilege of capturing Frangrasyân (Pers. Afrâsiyâb), the arch-enemy of the Iranians, and bringing him Kawi Haosrawah (Pers. Key Khosrow). In the *Hôm yasht* there is a brief reference to this episode toward the end (Y. 11.7).

Tishtriya (Pahlavi Tishtar)

Tishtriya is the Iranian name of the star Sirius, the Dog Star, which brings drought, personified as the demon Apaasha. The hymn to Tishtriya (Yt. 8) is quite unique in the *yasht* collection, having little material in common with any of the other hymns.

The battle with Apaasha is described in two parts: 1. the rising of the Dog Star; battle between Tishtriya and Apaasha in the form of a black stallion, with Apaasha gaining the upper hand; 2. the sinking of the Dog Star and Tishtriya gaining the upper hand.

Among other mythological elements in the hymn are the feat of the archer Erkhsha, Tishtriya's fight with the witches who fall from heaven, and his fight with the Witch of Bad Seasons.

Verthraghna (Pahlavi Wahrâm)

The victorious warrior god of the Avesta. The god who smashes the resistance/valor of his opponents is not an individual god in the Rigveda, where the word is most commonly used as an epithet of Indra. In the Avesta, the name is used as an epithet of several divinities and heroes, notably Thraêtaona, who, like Indra, was a great dragon-slayer.

Vayu (Pahlavi Wây)

This is the god of the wind that blows through the intermediate space and the intermediate space itself, through which the breath soul (*urwan*) and vision-soul (*daênâ*) of the dead must travel to get to the Bridge of the Accountant. Vayu is therefore associated with inflexible destiny and has both a good and a bad side. The stern side of Vayu is expressed in some verses of the *Aogemadaêca*.

Sraosha (Pahlavi Srôsh)

Sraosha, originally the readiness of the worshipper and the god to listen to one another, is in the Young Avesta the god presiding over the rewards, as his standard epithet *Ashiya* (< *Ashi* “reward”) seems to imply.

In the Young Avesta he is a warlike god, whose main function is to destroy *daêwas* and other harmful beings in the camp of Evil. In particular his special opponent is “Wrath with the bloody club.”

In addition Sraosha is said to have been the first sacrificer and the first to recite the *Gâthâs* in the world of thought.

Like Haoma, the hymn to Sraosha is included in the *Yasna* (Y. 57), where it plays a crucial role in combating the powers of darkness.

Rashnu (Pahlavi Rashn)

This is the god of straight and correct behavior and, in the beyond, the judge who weighs the deeds of the dead on a balance.

Druwâspâ

This goddess is a pale figure in the Young Avesta. Her *yasht* is called *Gôsh yasht*, and she plays no important role in the Avestan pantheon. She may originate from eastern Iran, where Bactrian coins with her name, Lrouaspo, have been found.

Apâm Napât (Old Indic the same), “scion of the waters”

This may be the deity of the fire in the clouds.

Airyaman (Old Indic Aryaman) (Pahlavi Ērman)

This is the god of harmonious unions, being invoked at weddings, and of peace and healing (see *Videvdad* 22).

Nairyâ Sangha, Nairyô.sangha “the heroic announcement” (Pahlavi Nêryôsang)

The divine messenger (see *Videvdad* 22)

The khwarnah (OPers. farnah, Pahlavi xwarrah and xwarr)

This is not a deity, but a substance(?) that is somehow crucial for maintaining the Command. It has been translated in various ways. (Divine) Fortune or (divine) Munificence (plural: the divine gifts of fortune) cover some of the implications of this concept, but perhaps not all. Traditionally, the term is often translated as Glory, referring in part to “fame and glory” and in part to a luminous nimbus surrounding the heads of heroes, especially kings. It is an indispensable qualification for kingship to possess this Fortune (see *Yasht* 19).

Numerous beings in the world of thought are enumerated in the *Yasna*, many of whom are difficult to identify and who belong to the category of “genius” rather than “god,” such as the genius of the home, of the year, etc.

Rigvedic gods = Iranian demons

When the *devas* were assigned in Iran *en masse*—as *daêwas*—to the camp of Evil, some of the Rigvedic gods went with them, Indra, Sharva, and the twin Nâsatyas (Ashvins), who are explicitly mentioned in Vd. 10.9 and 19.43 in an enumeration of *daêwas*. In the Pahlavi books, this series of demons is assigned as opponents of the forces of Good as follows:

<u>Demons</u>		<u>Deities</u>	
Angra Manyu	Akôman	Vohu Manah	Wahman
Indra + Saurwa	Indar + Sâwul	Asha Vahishta	Ardwahisht
Nânghaithya	Nânghait	Khshathra Vairiya	Shahrewar
[Ârmaiti]	Tarômat	Spentâ Ârmaiti	Spandarmad
Taurwi	Tarich	Haurvatât	Hordad
Zairi	Zêrich	Amertatât	Amurdad
Aêshma	Êshm	Sraosha	Srôsh

7. ZOROASTRIANISM UNDER THE ACHAEMENIDS

The question most commonly asked by historians of Iranian religion throughout this century, and one of those most hotly debated, has been whether the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians or not. The answer to this question has commonly been sought in terms of similarities and differences between Zoroastrianism and the Achaemenid religion as expressed in their inscriptions. The differences have often been defined in terms of “omissions and discrepancies” in the inscriptions as compared with Zoroastrianism: it is argued that, since many key terms and notions of Zoroastrianism are absent from the Old Persian inscriptions, the Achaemenid religion was at least not “pure” Zoroastrianism. Such points of view, however, do not take sufficiently into account the fact that the Avesta, our principal source for the oldest Iranian religion, and the Old Persian inscriptions are two fundamentally different kinds of texts: royal proclamations versus ritual texts, as well as in different languages. There is therefore no particular reason to expect the mention of Zarathustra, for instance, who, we may note, is also not mentioned in the Sasanian inscriptions, which are clearly “Zoroastrian.”

To answer such a question one must, of course, carefully describe and define both “Achaemenid religion” and “Zoroastrianism.” For our purpose, we shall loosely define the former as the religion expressed in the various primary and secondary sources at our disposal and the latter as the religion expressed in the Avesta, the sacred book of the Zoroastrians. We shall see that there are so many similarities between Achaemenid religion and Zoroastrianism defined in this manner that it is hard to conclude that the latter was not the religion of the Achaemenid kings, at least from Darius on.

The original question then has two possible answers. Either the Achaemenids had always been Zoroastrians, or there was a religious reform by which the early Achaemenids became Zoroastrians. Mary Boyce argues for the first solution by simply pointing out that there are no indications in our sources that there was any kind of religious reform at that time; and so it would be a plausible conclusion that by the 6th century the Avesta was known in western Iran and that from Darius on, at least, the Avesta was bodily in Persis. On the whole, this seems to be the better solution, although other scenarios are thinkable. If, for instance, the religion was brought by Persian conquerors, there would be no reform, just the superimposition of their religion upon that of the conquered, and there are indications (in the genealogy) that this may be the case.

7.1. Sources

Our sources for the Achaemenid religion are:

1. Primary sources:

The Old Persian inscriptions.

Akkadian and Elamite inscriptions.

The Elamite and Aramaic inscriptions from Persepolis (ca. 509-458 b.c.e.).

Aramaic letters (late 5th cent.).

Achaemenid art and archeology.

2. Secondary sources: Greek sources: Herodotus and others.

Since the Old Persian inscriptions only start with Darius I,¹ information about history and religion before this period—including, of course everything about the Medes and other early Iranian tribes, such as the Scythians—has to be sought in other sources .

¹ The Old Persian inscriptions ascribed to his predecessors: Cyrus, Ariaramnes, and Arsames all date from after Darius; the Old Persian version of Cyrus's inscriptions at Pasargadae may have been added under the later Achaemenids, and those of Ariaramnes and Arsames may be modern fabrications.

7.2. *The Cyrus cylinder*

The only extensive text from an Iranian king before Darius is the Cyrus cylinder written in Akkadian, in which Cyrus describes his religious policy. This cylinder, which was found in Babylon in 1879 and is now in the British Museum, as well as a fragment formerly at Yale, but now reunited with the main piece, describes Cyrus's religious activities. Unfortunately this text does not tell us much about Cyrus's own religion or his religious policies at home, and there are no other direct sources. The question of Cyrus's religion has therefore been hotly debated, though there are no conclusive arguments for any of the current opinions.

7.3. *The Elamite texts from Persepolis*

The Elamite texts found by the Oriental Institute at Persepolis during excavations in 1333-34 led by Ernst Herzfeld and published as the Fortifications tablets (dating from the years 509-494 of the reign of Darius I) and the Treasury tablets (dating from the years 492-458 of the reigns of Darius I, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes I) provide a wide range of information about the religion, not all of which is yet clearly understood. Numerous gods are mentioned in the texts, as well as several kinds of religious services, several types of priests, and they describe the amount of produce bought for religious services. Most of the gods are clearly Iranian, but there are also some Elamite and Babylonian ones.

Gods

Persian gods and divinities:

Ahuramazdâ

Visai Bagâ “All Gods”

Ispandâramaiti “Life-giving Humility”

Naryasanga, Av. Nairyâ Sangha

Ertâna Fraverti “pre-souls of the Orderly”

*Druvâ, either the god of Time (Av. Zruwâ “time”) or a god or goddess of Health (cf. OPers. *duruva* “healthy, unharmed,” Av. *Druwâspâ* “she who keeps the horses healthy”)

Mizhdushi, apparently a female deity “the reward-granting one” (Av. *mizhda* “reward”)

Bertakâmiya, deity referred to as “he/she through whom one’s wish is obtained”?

Huwarîra, deity of sunrise?

divinities of rivers, mountains, places, and cities.

Elamite gods (Koch, 1977, pp. 101-9):

Humban: chief Elamite god

Napir irshara “the Great God”;

etc.

Babylonian gods (Koch, 1977, pp. 109-12):

Adad: weather god

KI: “Earth.”

Rituals

The principal service was the *lan* service (Elamite *d.lan*; Koch, 1977, pp. 129-40). This is the only service that seems to have been celebrated on a grand scale, judging from the large quantity of provisions recorded for it.

In the tablets the term *d.lan* is often listed together with names of deities, e.g., PF 1956, where it is listed together with *Druva, *Huwarira, the Earth, and *Visai Bagâ.

As Ahura Mazdâ himself is only rarely mentioned in these tablets, it is usually assumed that the *lan* service was the service for the supreme deity, who therefore was not mentioned by name himself (Koch, 1977, p. 138).

Among the other types of services were the *daussa* “libation service” (Av. *zaothra*) or *daussiya* and *baga-daussiya* “libation service for the god(s)” (Koch, 1977, pp. 125-29).

Religious officials

Among officials in charge of or participating in the services the following may be mentioned (Koch, 1977, pp. 154-70):

shaten “priest” (Elamite), the most commonly mentioned term.

magush (OPers. *magush*), chiefly involved with the *lan* service, exceptionally services for Visai Bagâ, Druvâ, a river, and a mountain

yashtâ (Av. *yashta*), “sacrificer”

âterwakhsha (Av. *âtrewakhsha*), originally in charge of the fire. This official is also only mentioned in connection with *lan* services.

7.4. The Aramaic texts from Persepolis

The Aramaic texts found by the Oriental Institute’s excavations at Persepolis in 1936-38 are limited to inscriptions on utensils for preparing the haoma, such as the *hâwan* “mortar” (Av. *hâwana*) and *abishâwan* “pestle.”

7.5. The Aramaic letters from Elephantine

These letters from the military colony at Elephantine in the Nile mostly date from the 5th century. The most important evidence in these letters is that of the personal names, some of which clearly reflect the Avestan religion, e.g.,

Artaxwant “*possessing Order”

Âterfarna “enjoying the munificence of the fire”

Ârma(n)tidâta “given by (Life-giving) Ârmaiti”

Bagafarna “enjoying the munificence of the gods”

Bagazushta “in whom (in whose sacrifice) the gods take pleasure, approved by the gods”

Hômdâta “(child) given by Haoma”

Mazdayazna “who sacrifices to/worships (Ahura) Mazdâ”

Mithradâta “(child) given by Mithra”

Mithrayazna “who sacrifices to/worships Mithra”

Spentadâta “(child) given by Life-giving (Ârmaiti?)”

Tîripâta “protected by Tîri.”

Zhâmâspa, epic name

7.6. The Achaemenid inscriptions

In the Achaemenid inscriptions, the kings are portrayed as worshipping, i.e., sacrificing to, the great god (*baga*) Ahuramazdâ, who produced and maintains the ordered cosmos and who bestowed the royal command upon them, so that they might (re)establish and maintain order on earth. The purpose of the established order is to provide *happiness* for man and guide his life so that he may be among Ahuramazdâ’s chosen after death.

The Old Avesta itself is fundamentally the poet-sacrificer’s oral announcement of his knowledge, praise of Ahura Mazdâ and his work, and blame, that is, denunciation of those on the side of (possessed by) the Lie. Among the technical terms for the god’s announcements, the most common is the simple word “speak,” but there is also “command, instruct, ordain” (*sâh-*) and “announce” (*sangh-*) which is used about both the sacrificer and Ahura Mazdâ.

His announcements are, in fact, by themselves capable of combating the Lie and its evil and protect all living beings (2.44.14), And it is by his announcements that the sacrificer will bring back dawn once again (2.46.3).

The equivalent of Avestan *sangh-* in Old Persian is *thangh-*, the standard term for the king's statement or announcement: King Darius announces (*thâti*) ... These statements of the Achaemenid kings announce their knowledge, praise of Ahuramazdâ and his work, blame of the followers of the Lie, and his purpose, and thus serve to uphold the Order of the land.

By his announcement, the king states his identity and his side in the battle against evil. Thus, in the Bisotun inscription, we have, put simply:

- the king's self-presentation by stating his name and his ancestry (cf. DNA 8-15).
- a statement about the king's appurtenance to Ahura Mazdâ, who bestowed the royal command upon him.
- a statement about the king's activities: supporting the work of Ahuramazdâ and combating the forces of the Lie.¹

While Darius's statement about his identity (I am Darius, the great king, etc.), Darius's opponents all present themselves falsely, as in DB 1.77-78: And a certain Babylonian, Nidintu-Bêl, son of Ainaira, rose up in Babylon. He lied to the people: "I am Nebuchadrezzar, the son of Nabonidus."

Darius states his appurtenance to Ahuramazdâ in no dubious terms in DSk: King Darius announces: Ahuramazdâ is mine, I am Ahuramazdâ's. I sacrificed to Ahuramazdâ. May Ahuramazdâ bear me aid!

Here the relationship between Ahuramazdâ and the king is portrayed as one of *possession* between god and his worshipper/sacrificer, in which Ahuramazdâ in return for worship/sacrifice assists the king in maintaining his land. It is difficult to state more explicitly the function of the sacrifice and the mutual indebtedness of the two participants: the sacrificer and the divinity (see below on the Ritual).

Throughout his inscriptions, Darius assures us that he was an active participant in the battle against the Lie (cf. DB 1.34-35, DB 4.33-40), and he regards his opponents as having been bewildered and deceived by the Lie and so become its minions.

Being on the side of the Lie also manifests itself in the worship of the wrong gods, the *daivas*. Darius and Xerxes both used the proscription of the worship of wrong gods (*daiva*) as a means of subduing and punishing local rebellions, and Darius explicitly prescribes punishment for the evil-doer (e.g., DB 4.67-69).

The king represents himself as a just king, however, treating everybody equally and justly (DB 1.20-22, DNB 16-24), and he rewards those who behave according to the Law (*dâta*) he has laid down (DB 1.23, cf. OAv. 1.28.10), but punishes those who do not.

Thus, the kings fulfill their duties to Ahura Mazdâ by upholding his law and pursuing and punishing those who do not, who are liars and rebels or foreigners who worship the wrong gods, and his advice to other kings is to behave in the same manner (DB 4.61-65).

The basic acceptable behavior consists in speaking only what was real, true (*hashiya*), behaving with rectitude (*ershtâ*), and doing what is straight (*râsta*), as opposed to lying (*durujiya-*), doing wrong or erring (*vinâthaya-*), behaving crookedly (*zûra kar-*), deviously or erratically (*mitha*). In addition, the king is to protect the land from foulness, the evil stench of the Lie (*gasta*). Abiding by the Law, that is, by what has been established as true and correct behavior, also means not leaving the straight path in rebellion against the authorities (DNA 58-60).

The man who behaves well, that is, according to the established law of Ahuramazdâ, will receive a reward both in life and in afterlife. The goal of man is to act in such a way that he becomes happy (*shiyâta*) while alive (which is what Ahuramazdâ intended for him) and at one with Order (*artâvan*) when dead (DB 5.18-20, XPh, and cf. Y.71.13-16).

The king obviously performs god's will on earth, and his achievements in the world of the living parallel and match those of Ahura Mazdâ in the world of thought. There is no explicit statement to this effect in the inscriptions nor in the

¹ The similarity with 2.43.7-8, in which the Old Avestan poet-sacrificer identifies himself and states his side is remarkable.

artistic representations, but it is implicitly clear.¹

Thus, the king's principal function is to overcome chaos and evil and reestablish and consolidate political order, peace, and fertility in his realm. The prerequisites are the knowledge of the mysteries or, rather, the basic truths of existence, as well as the command (*khshassa*), which the sacrificer must work hard for, but the king is endowed with by god himself.

Foremost of this esoteric knowledge is the knowledge of the importance of Ahuramazdā, of his supremacy among the gods, his ordering of the cosmos, including establishing happiness for man, and his bestowal of the royal command on Darius (and his successors).

Like Ahuramazdā, then, the king's function is to maintain Order in his land, and, indeed, whenever Darius saw chaos reign in the land, he would put it back in order (DNa 31-36, XPh 30-35). Thus it is up to the *king* to maintain the peace established for mankind by Ahuramazdā, as it is the job of the sacrificer to maintain (YH.35.4, 3.47.3).

We see that the simple term *shiyāti* in Darius's inscriptions corresponds—structurally—closely to the Old Avestan concept of peace and pasture. The *Gāthās* span the history of the world and the sacrifice: from (1) the ordering act of Ahuramazdā: the establishment of Order as seen in the diurnal sky with the sun, of the earth, of man, and of good things for man: the pleasure-giving cow, to (2) the replication of this act in the sacrifice: the establishment of the ritual Order, the weaving and spreading out of the sacrificer's good thought (corresponding to the heaven), the establishment of the sacrificer's humility and the sacred ground (Ārmaiti = the earth), the Life-giving Man (the qualified and successful poet-sacrificer) and the Goal: good things for man: “peace and pasture.” Similarly, but much more briefly, Darius's inscriptions: (3) establishment of heaven, earth, man, and good things for man: happiness (*shiyāti*).

<u>history of the world</u>	<u>sacrifice</u>	<u>inscriptions</u>
the sun	Order	
diurnal sky	good thought	earth
earth	Ārmaiti	heaven
man	Life-Giving Man	man
pleasure-giving cow	peace and pasture	happiness

Finally, the king has an “esthetic” function. Just as the ultimate purpose of the Old Avestan sacrifice is to make this existence “Juicy” (*frasha*) in anticipation of the final “Juicy-making” or “Perfectioning” at the end of the world, so also does Darius endeavor to produce “perfect” (*frasha*) work on earth (DSf 55-57).

In conclusion, that the Achaemenid king performs his Zoroastrian duties faithfully should be perfectly clear:

- He praises Ahuramazdā and his ordered cosmos,
- he worships Ahuramazdā and the other gods, those, that is, that are worthy of worship,
- he discards the wrong gods, the *daivas*,
- he repeats time and again that Ahuramazdā is the greatest of the gods,
- and he represents himself as having all the good qualities of a follower of Order and Ahuramazdā.

He is truly in the tradition of Zarathustra, indeed, in his function as mediator between the gods and men, as supreme sacrificer, he, like the Old Avestan sacrificer, becomes Zarathustra permanently.²

Moreover, unlike the Old Avestan sacrificer, he need not worry about proving himself competent before obtaining the ritual command, since, like Zarathustra, he is Ahuramazdā's chosen and was endowed with the royal command by the god himself:

¹ Only in the Sasanian period do we find the idea expressed in the royal reliefs, where the victory of the king's enemy is equal to Ahura Mazdā's victory over the Evil Spirit.

² Similarly, in the Young Avesta, it is said that for the sacrificer to succeed he should sacrifice like Zarathustra, model or prototype of sacrificers (Yt.13.41).

Darius in fact reunites in one and the same person the functions of supreme king—prototype Yima—and supreme sacrificer—prototype Zarathustra. In the later, Sasanian literature, this constellation, is said to introduce the end of time, when the world will again be made *frasha* (the Renovation), which, as we have seen, Darius has already done. Thus, Darius fits into a long line of Iranian kings who expect the end of the world and the Renovation to be, as it were, around the corner.

7.7. *Religion of the Persians according to Herodotus (ca. 425 B.C.E.)*

Among the details furnished by Herodotus about the Persian religion, note the following, most of which are known from either the Avesta or the later Zoroastrian tradition:

Sacrifices must only take place in the presence of a Magus. After the victim had been cut in pieces and the flesh had been boiled it was laid out upon soft grass. A Magus chanted a hymn, which was said to recount the origin of the gods (1.132).

The Persians considered it the most disgracing thing in the world to tell lies, the next to owe a debt. They revered the rivers and never polluted them with dirt from their own bodies, including by washing themselves in a river (1.139). The bodies of the dead male were buried only after they had been torn by dogs or birds of prey. The Magi covered the bodies with wax before burying them (1.140). The Magi would kill animals other than dogs and men of all kinds, especially ants and snakes and other flying or creeping things, with their own hands (1.140).

7.8. *Other Classical authors on the Old Persian religion*

Another Classical source is Xanthus of Lydia, who lived slightly before Herodotus and who gives us two important pieces of information:

1. the Persians claimed that it was Zoroaster who had made the rule against burning dead bodies or otherwise defiling the fire;
2. the Magians cohabit with their close female relatives.

It is also Xanthus to whom the earliest testimony about the date of Zarathustra is credited. The late writer Diogenes Laertius in his Life of the Philosophers quotes Xanthus as saying that there were 6,000 years between Zoroaster and Xerxes's Greek expedition, and Hermodorus, of the Platonic school, as stating that Zoroaster the Persian ruled five (or six) thousand years after the capture of Troy.

8. ZOROASTRIANISM UNDER THE SELEUCIDS AND ARSACIDS (PARTHIANS)

Sources for the Seleucid period: coins, inscriptions (in Greek and Aramaic), and the Classical authors.

Alexander and his soldiers are credited with great harm done to the Iranian religion: by killing the priests *(the magi), by destroying and dispersing the holy scriptures, and by damaging and destroying holy places and temples. The indigenous literary tradition, which has preserved most of these stories, can of course not be trusted to have preserved actual records of what happened, as all historical events recorded in this tradition were recast in traditional literary forms. The Greek historians, on the other hand, were probably not particularly interested in transmitting horror stories about Alexander and his troops, even if they had committed crimes against the clergy, etc., so they cannot be trusted either. Finally, the archeological record provides little information about what actually happened.

As a matter of fact, considering the growing chaos in the imperial succession and administration, similar conditions may be conjectured for the clergy, too, and the church may well have been as much its own enemy as Alexander.

At the death of Alexander the empire quickly disintegrated. Alexander's generals, who became governors of the various parts of the Achaemenid empire, had taken Iranian wives, and their offspring was therefore partly Iranian. Thus Seleucus's son and successor was Antiochus I (ca. 280-262).

One thing to note about the Seleucid kings is that they begin calling themselves *theos* “god,” as well as *sôtêr* “savior.” The potential importance of this titulature should not be underestimated. There is a long tradition in Iran of new kings inaugurating new dynasties who considered themselves as having conquered the Evil Spirit himself and thus considered themselves as saviors and inaugurators of the era of the Perfectioning (Renovation), predicted in the Avesta.

The Parthian dynasty established its control over Iran with Mithridates I’s (ca. 171-138) conquest of Seleucia on the Tigris in 141, and this control was expanded and consolidated under Mithridates II (ca. 123-87). Both kings were no doubt Zoroastrians and regarded Mithra as their protective deity.

The Arsacids were the first to introduce Hellenistic anthropomorphic iconography in public and on their coins, although the deities were represented by their Greek names.

It is in the Arsacid period that Zoroastrianism gains a foothold in Armenia, and Armenian sources have preserved valuable evidence about the religion of those times.

From the first century of the new era, we have the important testimony of Strabo, the Herodotus of his day, who tells us (15.3.15) that the Iranians had both temples to their gods [Parth. *bagin*] and fire temples [Parth. *âtrôshan* < **âtrwaxhana* > Arm. *atrushan*]. And we also have the description by Pausanias, a Greek traveler who saw Zoroastrian communities in Lydia.

The most interesting of the kings from this period is vassal of the Parthians, Antiochus of Commagene, who called himself *theos dikaios epiphanes philaromaios philhellen*. His grave, located at a site called Nimrud Dağ, is fronted by a row of seated deities, whose names are inscribed in Greek letters. In the inscription accompanying the statues Antiochus says:

I chose to consecrate this place as a sacred seat for all the gods to share, so that there may be not only this heroic band of my ancestors which you see established by my care, but also the divine semblance of manifest deities sanctified on a holy summit, and so that this spot may be a witness that shall not fail to tell of my piety. Wherefore, as you see, I have set up these divine images (*agalmata*) of Zeus Oromasdes and of Apollo Mithra Helio Hermes and of Artagnes Heracles Ares and also of my all-nourishing homeland Commagene. And from the same stone, throned likewise among the gracious daemons, I have consecrated the features of my own form, and thus admitted a new Tyche to share in the ancient honours of the great gods.”

Antiochus’s advice to future kings goes as follows:

It is commanded to the generations of all men whom boundless time (*chronos apeiros*) shall, through its destiny for the life of each, set in later possession of the land, that they keep it inviolate.

It is from the Parthian period that we have for the first time an extensive description of the Iranian cosmology. This is found in the work *On Isis and Osiris* by Plutarch (ca. 46-120).

Among the archeological remains from the Parthian period the remains of several fire temples dating from several successive centuries into the Sasanian period on the Kûh-e Khwâja in the Hâmûn lake in Sistan.

At Bisotun in western Iran there is a relief of Hercules, who corresponded to Parthian Warthragn, the epithet of Avestan Thraetaona (Thraêtaona), which had taken on a life of its own. The Greek inscription is dated to 147 B.C.E.

The same identification between Hercules and Warthragn is seen in a Parthian-Greek inscription from the mid-2nd cent. C.E., by the king Arsakes Vologeses, son of Mithridates, who seized the province of Mesene from Mithridates son of Pakores. The inscriptions are placed on the thigh of a statue, which the Greek identifies as Hercules and the Parthian as Warthragn. As the inscriptions make clear, the statue was part of the booty acquired by a Parthian king and brought back from Mesene to be put in the temple (*bagin*) of the god Tîr.

It is also to the Arsacid or earlier periods that the establishment of the three major sacred fires may be dated: Âdur Burzênmîhr, Âdur Farrôbag (or Farmbag), Âdur Gushnasp. Most of our information about these fires comes from the

later Zoroastrian books and is therefore to some extent legendary.

Âdur Burzênmîhr was placed on Mt. Rêwand, known already from the Avesta. M. Boyce suggests that the mountain was identified with some mountain in Parthia in eastern Iran. Whether there was actually a nationally known fire temple to this fire in Parthia, we do not know. We should note that the literary tradition locates the fire in various places, and in the *Book of Kings* it is also said to have been founded at Balkh by Wishtâsp's father Lohrâsp.

The second great fire, Âdur Farrôbag, according to the late tradition was brought from Khorasmia to Fârs during Wishtâsp's reign.

The third great fire, Âdur Gushnasp, was associated with Lake Chêchasht (Urmia) in western Iran (Azarbaijan) in the tradition, but a temple was built for it at Takht-e Soleymân. This temple plays an important role in the stories of the Sasanian kings.

The most important written corpus from the Parthian period is that discovered at ancient Nisa, east of the Caspian Sea. Hundreds and hundreds of labels on wine jars, bear evidence to toponymy, calendar, onomastics, etc. Among other things, the word *âyazan* is mentioned, which must mean a sacred place for worship. In the pantheon we must note the presence of the old Mesopotamian goddess Nanai, who is mentioned in the Nisa documents and became extremely popular in central Asia, including Bactria, where she is the principal protective deity of Kanishka. She probably replaced Anâhitâ, and the phonetic (acoustic) similarity of the two names probably played some part in this identification.

9. ZOROASTRIANISM UNDER THE SASANIANS

The founder of the Sasanian dynasty was the last in a line of local kings in southern Iran, the so-called Frataraka dynasty. Nothing much is known about these kings, but they struck coins. From their names – Dârâyân, Manuchihr, Wâdfradâd, Ardashahr – we can gather that they basically continued the Achaemenid religious traditions.

The Sasanian kings entitle themselves *bay* from the old *baga* “lord, god” and state they are “descended from the gods.” This probably continues the practice of the Seleucid kings, who imitated Alexander and called themselves “god” (Greek *theos*).

From the Parthian period we have the ruins of a temple at Persepolis belonging to the Fratarakas, where a votive tablet was found bearing the names of the highest Greek deities, probably covering those of Iranian Ahura Mazdâ, Mithra, Anâhitâ, and Ashish Vanghwi. On one of the walls there is a carving showing a priest holding the barsom in one hand.

An interesting fact about these coins is also that the script form changes under the last predecessors of Ardashahr I, from a typically Aramaic script form, to the Middle Persian form seen in the Sasanian inscriptions. It is tempting to see in this change the trace of a—perhaps nationalist—reform, out of which the usurper/liberator emerged.

From the inscriptions of Ardashahr (Ardashîr) I, it is clear that he, like his remote ancestor Darius, represents himself as the true carrier and protector of the Mazdayasnian religion. His titulature includes: “the Mazdayasnian Lord,” where the word for “Lord” is *bay* < OPers. *baga*, the common epithet of Ahuramazdâ; “who is of the race of gods,” a title which clearly confirms their belief in a divine connection. In his reliefs the King is represented as receiving the royal diadem directly from Ohrmazd. Finally, in his victory relief, where he depicts his victory over his predecessor Ardashâr, he sits on his horse opposite Ohrmazd, under the hooves of whose horse lies the vanquished Evil Spirit himself. It is clear that here again the king considered himself as God's representative and as having ousted the Lie from the realm and established God's will on earth. In this way he represents himself as God's principal ally in the divine scheme of overcoming and abolishing the primordial evil.

Most of the extant Zoroastrian literature aside from the Avesta is from the Sasanian period.

10. THE AVESTA

10.1. The writing down of the Avesta

The Avestan texts known to us today represent only a small part of the oral traditions that were committed to writing in the Sasanian period (224-651 C.E.): as little as one-fourth has been conjectured. Sometime during this period a phonetic alphabet was invented, which was used to write down in minute detail the known texts.

At this time, all the available Iranian alphabets were consonant alphabets descended from Aramaic (except the Bactrian alphabet, which was Greek), which were quite unsuitable for recording a largely unfamiliar language. A new alphabet was therefore invented based, apparently, on the cursive Pahlavi script of the Zoroastrian literature, but with the addition of earlier forms of some letters, taken from the script found in the *Pahlavi Psalter*, a Middle Persian translation of the *Psalms of David* found in Chinese Turkestan.

It must be kept in mind that our earliest mss. are all, probably, over 500 years younger than the “proto-manuscript” of the Avesta, what Karl Hoffmann called the “Sasanian archetype.” Thus, we do not know exactly what forms the letters had.

According to the indigenous tradition contained in the Pahlavi texts (especially the *Dēnkard*) about the Avesta, after Alexander had destroyed or dispersed the text written in gold on bulls’ hides, it was then reassembled, presumably on the basis of oral traditions and, perhaps, surviving manuscripts, under Walâsh, one of the Arsacid kings, again under Shâpûr I (240-272 C.E.), and finally under Shâpûr II (309-79 C.E.).¹

10.2. The zands

It is important to realize that already by the Young Avestan period the *Old Avesta* can no longer have been well understood and was in need of translation and commentary, and we actually do find in the extant Avesta commentaries in Young Avestan on Old Avestan texts. Only the commentaries on the three holy prayers have been preserved (Yasna 19-21), but there also existed commentaries on the remaining Old Avestan texts, some of which have been preserved in Pahlavi translation in the ninth book of the *Dēnkard*, which contains Pahlavi versions of Avestan commentaries on the *Gâthâs*.

Similarly, as the Avestan texts were adopted by other Iranian population groups than those who had originally composed them, commentaries and translations into local languages became a necessity. Thus we can safely assume that there were at one time early Bactrian, Parthian, Median, etc. versions of the texts. If, by the Achaemenid period, the Avesta was in Persis, such a tradition of local versions and exegesis in local languages must have been established there too.²

Whether any of these “local versions” were ever written down we do not know—though it is possible—but the transmission of the holy texts, like that of the secular literature that has not survived, must have been fundamentally oral. We can easily imagine that instructors taught the texts to the students by reciting the original text in small portions and adding the translation and the commentary as they went along. This is what we see in our extant manuscripts of the Avesta.

By the Sasanian period the Avestan text itself was largely incomprehensible to the reciters, but translations into the spoken languages had already been made, which must have been current as early as the 3rd century C.E., when one of the *nasks* of the Avesta was quoted by the high priest Kerdîr in one of his inscriptions. The *nasks* of the Avesta are also referred to in a Manichean text, dating from the 3rd-4th century. In another Manichean text the five *Gâthâs* are mentioned by name.

¹ M. Shaki, “The *Dēnkard* Account of the History of the Zoroastrian Scriptures,” *Archív Orientální* 49, 1981, pp. 114-25. – Note that the authors of the Pahlavi books had little idea of historical chronology.

² On possible Avestan “citations” in Old Persian, see Skjærvø, 1999, “Avestan Quotations?”

It is quite probable that the Middle Persian translation of the Avesta with commentaries and additional material (the *Avesta* and its *zand* > the Zand-Avesta) had already been written down by this time, but probably not the Avestan texts themselves.

10.3. “Corruption” of the Avestan text

The manuscripts of the *Avesta* all go back to single manuscripts for each part (*Yasna*, *Yashts*, etc.), which the colophons permit us to date to around 1000 C.E. For some parts of the text, we have manuscripts from the 13th-14th centuries, for others the tradition does not go beyond the 16th-18th centuries.

We should also remember that the proto-text of our *Avesta* is based on “final performances.” The question of *how* the Avestan texts were committed to writing once the alphabet had been invented around 500 C.E. has not been raised, but is of paramount importance for understanding the state of the text. There are, in fact, only two possibilities (or a combination of them): either a person who knew the text was taught the alphabet and wrote down what he knew, or a person who knew the text dictated it to someone who knew the script. Either procedure would obviously influence the recorded text adversely, as with both procedures the fluency of the recitation would be interrupted. On the other hand, dictation would give the reciter time to remember more text than he might otherwise include during a recitation.

The text is an “edited” text and does not in every detail reflect a genuine linguistic system. During its 1000 to 1500 years of oral transmission, the text was standardized, and, once written down, it was modified by scribes who spoke dialects with phonological systems fundamentally different from that of the originals. Thus, the Old Avestan texts contain many YAv. elements and the YAv. texts contain both Old Avestan (“pseudo-OAv.”) elements and phonetic features introduced from the scribes’ languages (incl. Gujarati). This makes it almost impossible to determine which of the sound changes we observe in our extant texts already belonged already to the original language.

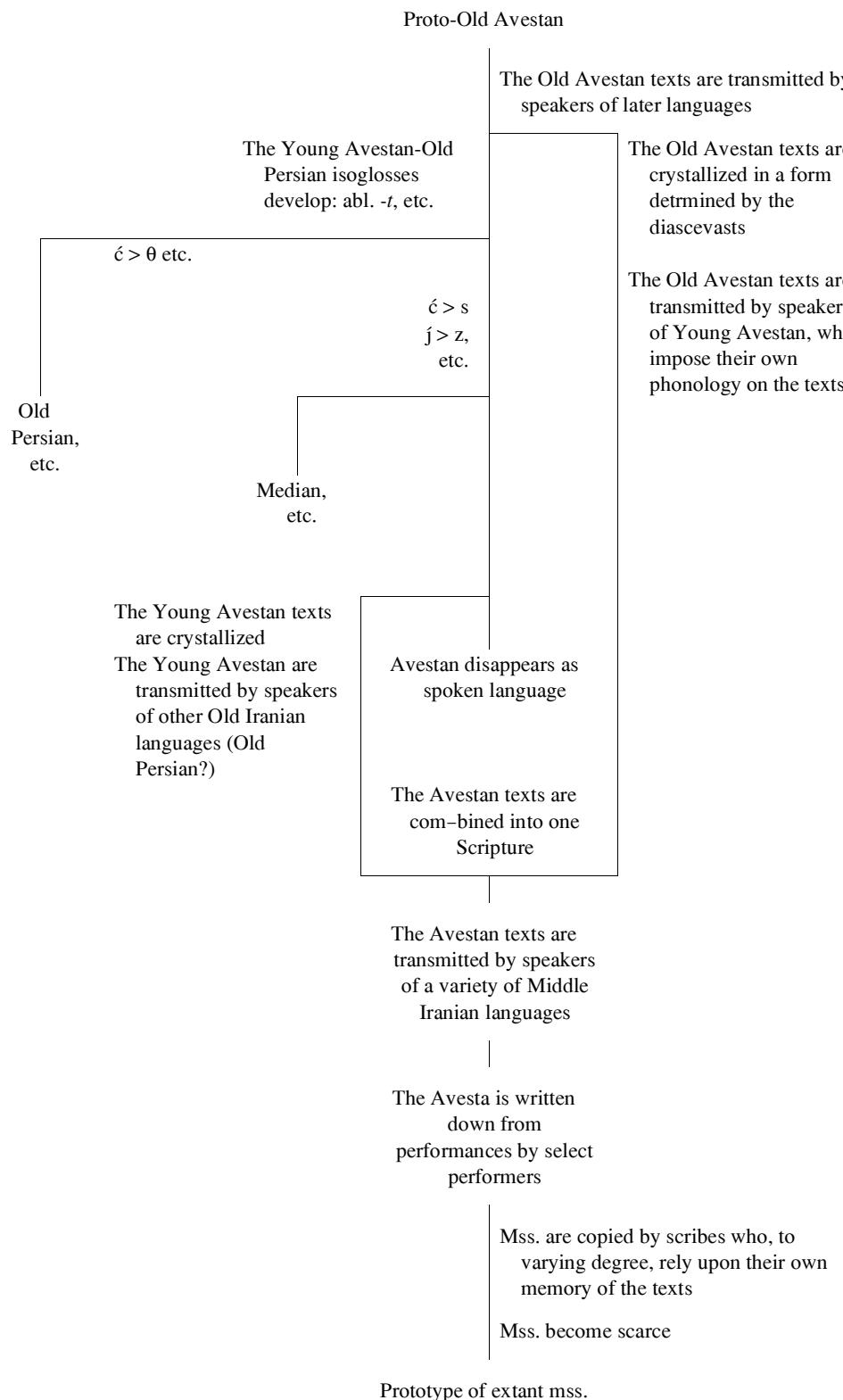
Many of the Young Avestan texts are in ungrammatical (or incorrect) language, but it must be kept in mind that it must have ceased being a spoken language probably some time in the (pre-)Median period, when the texts were “crystallized,” that is, no longer linguistically updated from generation to generation.¹ Thus, they were orally transmitted for at least a thousand years before they were written down, which, obviously, gave ample opportunity for them to be changed, especially by the less well trained reciters. In fact, we see that the most corrupt texts are those that were presumably recited most often.

The history of the text is approximately as follows:

- Composition of texts that were to lead to the Old Avestan texts, constantly linguistically updated (recomposed) in performance (mid-2nd mill. B.C.E.).
- Composition of the Young Avestan texts, constantly linguistically updated, etc. (end of 2nd/early 1st mill.).
- Crystallization of the Old Avestan text as unchangeable with introduction of editorial changes (early YAv. period?).
- Crystallization of the Young Avestan text as unchangeable (1st half of 1st mill.?).
- Canonization of select texts (under the Achaemenids?).
- Transmission of the entire immutable text with introduction of linguistic novelties and changes made by the (oral) transmitters (up to ca. 500 C.E.), with several attempts at “reassembling the scattered scriptures” (?).
- Creation of an unambiguous alphabet in which the entire known corpus was written down to the extent it was deemed worthy.
- Written transmission of the text influenced(?) by the oral tradition; copying of manuscripts contributes to deterioration of the text.
- The Arab conquest causes deterioration of the religion and its texts; ca. 1000 C.E. there is only one single manuscript in existence of each part of the extant *Avesta*, from which all our extant manuscripts are descended.

¹ This is the phenomenon by which an orally composed text, from being constantly recomposed in performance, at some stage, for some reason, is no longer recomposed but fixed in (re)performance.

10.4. The Transmission of the Avestan texts and Languages



11. COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY

The Avestan texts frequently refer to the cosmogonic myth, the story of how the world came into being, but the story itself is never told. The earliest narrative is that of Plutarch, who, in his *About Isis and Osiris*, recounted a story told by the Magi about the origin of our world. After that, we must wait for the Pahlavi literature for the (more or less) complete story, which is told in the *Bundahishn* and various other texts.

Nevertheless, it is possible on the basis of the allusions in the Avesta and the later traditions to fill in much of the greater picture that the Old Iranians had of the origin of the world.

11.1. Ordering of the cosmos

In both the Old and Young Avesta, as well as the Achaemenid inscriptions, the making – or creation – of the world is depicted as an ordering of elements that are themselves “created” or made in some way or other (by thinking, engendering, or fashioning). The verb designating the divine action of creating order is *dâ-* (Old Indic *dhâ-*), which literally means “place, set down, establish.” The objects that were put in order by Ahura Mazdâ, had been engendered by him or fashioned by various artisans, such as the divine Carpenter (*thwarshtar*) and the more specific Fashioner (*tashan*) of the Cow. These are the ones who actually formed the objects which Ahura Mazdâ then put/set in their proper place. Ahura Mazdâ himself is also said to have fashioned the cow, the waters, and the plants.

The same concepts are found in the Rigveda, where the world is depicted as having been measured out and established by the gods, like a building, but many of its elements also as having been engendered or generated by the gods.

In the Old Avesta.

References to the cosmogonic ordering process are found in all the Old Avestan poems, except the fifth Gatha, which is concerned with the victory over Evil. The reference in the fourth Gatha, which is concerned with the success of the sacrifice and the rewards, is also brief. The Gathic poet, however, is, as always, reluctant to state anything simply and clearly, while the *Yasna Haptanghâiti* presents the process in a relatively orderly fashion in YH.37.1-2.

The Achaemenid king Darius echoes this description in his inscriptions, in DNA 1-8, and it continues into the Pahlavi books, e.g., *Bdh.3.20-21*.

In the *Gâthâs* the most explicit cosmogony is in 2.44.3-7:

Ahura Mazdâ

engendered Order

established the road of the sun and of the stars

started the phases of the moon

held the earth down below and the heavens above

Heaven and Earth

established the waters and the plants

harnessed the two quick coursers to the wind and the clouds

Heaven

is the Web-master of good thought

Day and night

established lights and darkness, sleep and wakefulness, etc.

established

dawn, noon, and evening

Earth

Ârmaiti by her actions *thickens (the web of) Order

Ahura Mazdâ

fashioned the milk-giving cow, which makes happiness

Cow for man

Elsewhere, we have the following references to the cosmogony:

1.31.7-9:

Ahura Mazdâ

thought the lights of the free spaces, thought Order

Web-master of good thought

Heaven

Ârmaiti (the earth) was Ahura Mazdâ's

Earth

Ahura Mazdâ(?) fashioned for man

Man

the cow, etc.

Cow

2.44.3-7

3.48.3

Order

Heaven

Good thought: good and bad

Earth

Ârmaiti

Cow for man

Cow for man

Earth

Ârmaiti

gives youth, *thickens (the web of) Order, produces plants

4.51.7

you who fashioned

the cow

Heaven

the waters

Earth

the plants

In the Young Avesta.

Ahura Mazdâ's creation is described or alluded to in many passages in the Young Avesta, among them Y.19.2, Y.19.8, and Yt.13.86.

The ordering process is referred to in a variety of other contexts, as well, for instance, at the beginning of the *yasna* ritual in Y.1.1.

Occasionally, the ordering activity is ascribed to other deities, for instance, in Yt.19.52, the Scion of the Waters (Apâm Napât) is said to have fashioned and set in place men.

11.2. Birth of the cosmos

The creation act is also described as an engendering and birth process, as in 2.43.5, 2.44.3, 2.45.4, 3.48.6. In these texts, we see that the objects engendered by Ahura Mazdâ are, on the one hand, the Life-giving Immortals, on the other hand the *ahu*. Producing the *ahu* is in fact the goal of the sacrifice, and the production of the *first ahu* was presumably the result of Ahura Mazdâ's first sacrifice.

The birth scenario is particularly prominent in *Yasht* 13, the hymn to the pre-souls (fravashis), which begins with a description of how Ahura Mazdâ with the help of the Pre-souls made the world of the living from the sky down to the fetuses in the wombs. The description is presented by a repeated formula plus the respective basic elements of the "creation."

The birth scenario plays a prominent role also in later accounts of the Old Iranian cosmogony. Thus, the *Pahlavi Rivayat* (PR.46) describes the creation of the world of thought, and in the *Bundahishn* (Bdh.1.58-59) we are told the story of the gestation of the world of the living in the world of thought and its subsequent birth into the world of living beings.

11.3. The two spirits

According to the Avesta, Ahura Mazdâ was not the only one to “set things in place.” Already in the Young Avesta we find the notion of a dual “creation” by the Life-giving Spirit and the Evil Spirit, notably in the hymns to the pre-souls, to Vayu, and to Sraosha:

Yt.13.76 (to the pre-souls) = Y.57.17 (hymn to Sraosha)

when the two spirits established the “creations,” the Life-giving Spirit and the Evil one.

Yt. 15.43 (to Vayu)

both “creations,” both the one that the Life-giving Spirit established and the one the Evil Spirit established.

This creation scenario obviously intrigued the neighbors of the Iranians, notably the Greeks, who assigned it to the teachings of the Magi, as seen from the version told by Plutarch.

The dual creation is also the “standard” version in the Pahlavi texts, and can therefore be assigned to Zoroastrianism throughout most of its history. The question is then how old it actually is. More about this below.

11.4. Creation in the Pahlavi texts.

The dual creation is the “standard” version in the Pahlavi texts, where the act of creation is described in great detail. In the *Bundahishn*, for instance, we find the completely developed Mazdean dualist creation myth, according to which two principles existed from time immemorial, one good, Ohrmazd, in the heights, which are the endless lights, and one evil, Ahrimen, in the depths, which are endless darkness. For some reason or other, the Foul Spirit in the depths came to notice and subsequently desire the good up above and attack it in order to mix with it and thereby destroy its purity. Together with Ohrmazd were eternal time (without beginning or end) and the Endless Lights.

Ohrmazd realized that only through battle could Ahrimen be overcome and planned how to proceed and fashioned the “creation” (*dâm-dahishnîh*) he needed for his purpose. To start the process, he cut out a piece of eternal time, the Time of Long Rule, during which the battle between good and evil would be fought.

At this point Ohrmazd gave Ahrimen a chance to withdraw from his destructive scheme by sacrificing to his “creation,” which Ahrimen of course rejected. Ohrmazd then knew that a time schedule for the remaining course of the world was needed in order to prevent evil from reigning forever, and offered the evil one a pact whereby the time of the final battle would be after 9000 years, a pact which Ahrimen accepted, being to slow-witted to see its purpose. According to the pact, 3000 years would pass according to the will of Ohrmazd; for 3000 years the world would be in a state of mixture, according to the will of both Ohrmazd and Ahrimen, and in the last battle the evil spirit would be rendered powerless.

Ohrmazd then recited the *Ahunwar* prayer, by which Ahrimen was stunned and fell back into the darkness.

The complete creation of the world took 6000 years. During the first 3000 years, a “creation” in/of thought – without thought, without movement, and without touch – was established in the “world of thought.”

During the next 3000 years, another “creation,” this one “with bones” or “containing living beings” was established, but also in the “world of thought.” At the end of the second 3000 years, this second “creation” was transferred to the “world of living beings.”

During this period, the Foul Spirit for his part fashioned forth a destructive “creation” to use for the battle, and, as soon as the “creation of living beings” was transferred to the “world of living beings,” he attacked and introduced his evil “creation” into Ohrmazd’s creation, so that the two were mixed. Hence the next 3000 years are called the Mixture.

INTRODUCTION TO ZOROASTRIANISM

THE “CREATION” IN/OF THOUGHT IN THE WORLD OF THOUGHT

This is a “creation” that by necessity is performed in and with thought. Thus, the “creation of thought” was made by Ahura Mazdâ by his *thought*, especially the principle of Order itself, already in the Old Avesta:

1.31.7

He who was the first to think those thoughts: “The free spaces are blending with the lights”—

1.31.19

He who first thought Order has now listened to my words(?), namely, you, the knowing one, the healer of this state, O Ahura ...

Compare:

Bdh.1.35 [19]

And his first “creation” was “*self-established well-being, that spirit by which he made his body better when he *thought* the “creation,” for his being “ruler” is from establishing the “creation” (*dâm-dahishnîh*).

In the various narratives, the creation always proceeds in a more or less fixed order, as in *Bundahishn* chap. 1:

Ohrmazd’s “creation”

essence of the gods
time of the long dominion
permanence
from his own essence the form of the creatures
from it the good Vây
from material light true speech
from endless light endless form
from endless form the Ahunwar
from the Ahunwar the spirit of the year
the six Amesha Spentas
the three judges

Ahrimen’s “creation”

from material darkness lying speech
in the form of black *coal
Waran
by which the creatures were set in motion
the essence of the demons

“CREATION” OF THE LIVING IN THE WORLD OF THOUGHT

<u>the six Life-giving Immortals</u>	<u>“creations” in the world of the living</u>	<u>opponents</u>
Wahman	the sky	Akôman
Ardwahisht	the water	Indar and Sâwul
Shahrewar	earth	Nânghait
Spandarmad	plants	Tarômat
Hordad	cow	Tarich
Amurdad	man	Zêrich
true speech		dispute
Srôsh, etc.		

“CREATION” OF THE LIVING IN THE WORLD OF THE LIVING

endless lights > fire
fire > wind
wind > water
water > the earth

- 1 sky as defense
- 2 water to smite down the demon of thirst
- 3 plants for the kine
- 4 earth
- 5 kine for the blessed man
- 6 the blessed man to strike down the Foul Spirit
- 7 fire from endless lights
- 8 wind
- 1 in the form of an egg, aided by joy
- 2 an arm-length deep, aided by wind, etc.
- 4 smooth, aided by water and fire
- 3 totally smooth, containing minerals and metals
- 5 the bull in Êrânwêz, aided by water and plants
- 6 Gayômard, aided by sleep

11.5. The ritual “recreation” of the world

With this scenario as background, it is easily seen that the creation is also implied by the *Yasna*, the text that accompanies the *yasna* ritual, that is, the morning sacrifice, since the *yasna* is a replica of Ahura Mazdâ’s primordial sacrifice. After various introductory texts and actions the first main part of the *yasna* consists of a relatively immutable list of entities which are acted upon in various ways, as indicated by set formulas:

- I make known/introduce (*niwaêdhayemi*), I assemble/count X, a Model (*ratu*) of Order.
- In this libation and barsom (sacred plant twigs), by my sacrificing I harness (*âyeše*) ...
- By my sacrificing I harness ... for winning the favor of ...
- Thus we make them known to (*âwaêdhayemi*) ...
- We sacrifice (*yazamaide*) ...
- I place in Orderly fashion (*ashaya dadâmi*) ... for winning the favor of ...

With various additions and variants, the objects of these formulas are the following:

- Ahura Mazdâ and the six Life-giving Immortals
- The models for the units of time. These are accompanied by their own assigned geniuses of social divisions and deities in charge of cosmic phenomena:

time	genius of	genius of	deities
of haoma pressing	Increase (<i>Sâwanghi</i>)	the town (<i>vis</i>)	Mithra, Peace with Good Pasture
noon	Cattle-furthering	the tribe (<i>zantu</i>)	Best Order, AM’s fire (= the sun)
afternoon	Man-furthering	the land (<i>dahyu</i>)	Scion of the Waters, the Water
evening	Furthering-all-good-living	the one most like Zar.	the Pre-souls of the Orderly, the women to be won by men, the yearly good settlement, the well-fashioned Force, the Obstruction-smasher, Victorious Superiority
late night	Berjiya	the house	Sraosha, the obstruction-smasher furtherer of living beings, straightest Rashnu
			Rectitude, furtherer of living beings increaser of living beings

the months and their divisions: new moon, full moon, the moon of the 23rd day.

the seasons: spring, mid-summer, harvest, fall, mid-winter, New Year.

the years

3. Ahura (Mazdâ) and Mithra

the stars, Tishtriya, the moon, the sun, Mithra, Ahura Mazdâ, the Pre-souls of the Orderly

the fire of ahura Mazdâ with all the fires, the good waters with all the waters, all the plants

the life-giving poetic thought (*manthra*), the Law discarding the *daêwas*, the long *Tradition,

the good Daênâ of those who sacrifice to Ahura Mazdâ

Mt. Crack of Dawn and all the mountains, the Fortune of the Poets, the Unseizable Fortune

Good Ashi (Reward), etc.

Places, settlements, grazing grounds, dwellings

waters, grounds, plants, this earth, yonder sky

the Orderly wind, stars, moon, sun, the Endless Lights

We see that the list begins by establishing the models for the divisions of time, that is of Time of Long Rule, and then goes on to the various “creations” of thought, which are the basic components of the Ordered cosmos.

11.6. The twin spirits

The scenario from Plutarch with the wily Evil Spirit shows up in the so-called “Zurvanite” myth known from the early Muslim period, told by Armenian historians and some others, which in its main elements, goes as follows:

Before the world existed there was Zurvan. He sacrificed for 1000 years to have a son who would create heaven and earth. Seeing his sacrifice had no effect he doubted its value, and from his doubt Ohrmazd and Ahrimen were conceived. Seeing he would bear two sons he decided that the first-born would be king. Ohrmazd knew what his father was thinking and told his brother, who tore open his progenitor’s womb and emerged. Ahrimen, insisting upon his rights, was grudgingly accorded 9000 years of rule, after which Ohrmazd would rule. They both then began creating.

What is remarkable here is the fact that the good and the evil creators are twin brothers. The myth of the twin brothers is also quite old, however; it can at least be followed back to the Sasanians, when it was cited as “heretical” by Zoroastrian scholars, notably in an exegesis of 1.30.4:

Dk.9.30.4

And from the saying of Zardusht about the demon Arsh, how he howled to people:
Ohrmazd and Ahrimen were brothers from one womb!

The same statement is cited in a Manichean polemical hymn in Middle Persian, probably from the 3rd-4th cents.:

M28IRii1-4

And they say that Ohrmezd and Ahrimen are brothers.
And on account of this speech they will come to destruction.

The myth of the two spirits (*manyu*) is already in the *Gâthâs*, however, where we find the two *manyus* conversing (2.45.2ab). This reminds us of the Zurvanite myth, in which Ohrmazd and Ahrimen are speaking in the womb. The conversation between the two also seems to be preserved in another Manichean fragment, which appears to contain a version of the Zoroastrian creation myth close to that of Plutarch. This fragment is also in Middle Persian, which indicates a relatively early date:

BT 4, no. 23 (Sundermann, *Berliner Turfantexte* 4, pp. 79-80)

... the mixture.

And in this manner they consider that they were from one egg and from one seed.

And he shows in his book concerning all the gods and *mârâspands* (the Life-giving Immortals) that the gods ... with gods and ...

[long gap in the text]

[... when] we came out from ...

Then that egg was divided into two parts. From the one part of that egg that was upward, which was split and divided, heaven [was spread out? ...]

[long gap in the text]

And all creatures that move about on it (= the earth) came from that.

In this manner, by (their) ..., they mix together good and evil, light and darkness.

Here we note the statement in direct speech “we came out,” which strongly recalls the conversation between the two *manyus* in 2.45.2 and which must “logically” refer to the two spirits discussing how to assign the parts of the cosmos between them.

One of the most discussed passages in these poems is the following:

1.30.3a

Thus, those two inspirations in the beginning, which have been renowned (as) “the twin sleeps” ...

Long ago I proposed that “sleep” here is used metonymically for sleeping fetuses, comparing the following Indic text:

Manu-smṛti 1.5

This (thing) was, risen from darkness, unknown, with no distinguishing marks, inconceivable, incomprehensible, like asleep all over.

Thus, the myth of the two spirits would seem to be part of the cosmic birth scenario.

Another strophe referring to the two spirits and which has caused a lot of speculation in Iranist circles is 1.30.4:¹

Thus, also: whenever the two inspirations come together in competition one determines/receives (*dazdai*) for the first time

both life (*gaya*) (for the good) and lack of living (*ajyāti*) (for the bad) and how the(ir) *ahu* shall be at last: The worst *ahu* will be that of those possessed by the Lie, but for the sustainer of Order there will be best thought.

Remarkably, the Pahlavi version of this strophe interpreted *gaēm* as referring to Gayōmard (see below on the Creation of living creatures):

1.30.4ab Pahl.

And thus those two spirits came together to the first establishment, i.e., the two spirits came to Gayōmard.

This interpretation is not to be rejected off-hand, because, also in the *Young Avesta*, Gaya Martān is referred to simply as Gaya, and, since “lack of living” is nearly synonymous with *martān* “what contains what is dead, mortal,” the Old Avestan text may contain the same reference.

Gaya Martān, however, has Indo-Iranian forebears, having been compared with Old Indic Mārtānda, whose birth from Aditi is described as follows in the *Shatapatha-brāhmaṇa*:

ŚB III.1.3.3-4 (after Jamison)

She bore an eighth, unshaped: Mārtānda. He was a lump, as broad as he was tall.

(The Ādityas said,) “Come on, let us shape him!” They shaped him as man here (on earth).

This description of Mārtānda’s size is identical with that of Gayōmard in *Bdh*.1.A.13: “his width was equal to his height.” Mārtānda is variously represented as an aborted fetus or the *afterbirth* of the birth of the Ādityas from Aditi

The name of Gaya Martān, which, to my knowledge, has not been closely analyzed, in fact, seems to mean “life with a dead thing,” which perfectly describes the products of the birth process: the living new human followed by the dead afterbirth, the placenta.

Applying this scenario to the two primordial twin spirits is then completely unproblematic, and it is, indeed, strengthened by the fact that in modern Iran the afterbirth is called *joft* “twin.”

Yet another element potentially linking the Indic and Iranian myths is a passage from the *Kāthaka-samhitā*, in which the embryo speaks, provoking the rivalry of its brothers:

KS XI.6 (after Jamison)

She (Aditi) became pregnant (*garbhām adhatta*).

The embryo, (still) within (her), spoke.

The Ādityas [= his brothers] thought, “If this one will be born, he will thrive here.”

¹ In Old Avestan texts **bold** type is used for words actually in the text, while regular type are words added by the translator.

they smashed him out [= aborted him].

Expelled/aborted he lay there.

A second remarkable correspondence between the Old Avestan and Old Indic texts here is the use of *dhâ* “place” in the middle to express “become pregnant,” which we can perhaps compare with Old Avestan *dazdê* in the Old Avestan myth. If we apply this meaning to our passage, we obtain the remarkable sense: 1.30.4ab’ “and when those to inspirations come together, then one first becomes pregnant with life and non life.” Note also the expression “expelled,” literally “thrown out” (*nirasta*) and the fact that a notorious complication of birth is that of “retained” afterbirth, which then needs to be “thrown out,” as, for instance, the Babylonian terminology has it.

Without arguing further, I would therefore simply suggest that the Iranian creation myth is a complete birth myth and that the “radical dualistic” element originated in the observation of the dual birth: of the new living being and of the lifeless afterbirth.

11.7. *The creation of living creatures.*

The beginning of mankind is not described in the extant Young Avesta, but, according to the later tradition, among living creatures Ahura Mazdâ created first (Pahl.) Gayômard and the Uniquely-created Bull (Pahl. *Gâw i êkdâd*).

Gayômard is Avestan Gaya Martân, who often heads lists of created beings in the Young Avesta. In the later tradition Gayômard is killed by the Evil Spirit during the primeval attack upon the creation of Ohrmazd, but his semen is emitted into the earth and eventually gives rise to mankind. Note also Yt.13.87, where Ahura Mazdâ is said to have “fashioned forth the umbilical cords of the Aryan lands, the descent of the Aryan lands” from Gaya Martân.

The Pahl. Uniquely-created Bull has a pendant in the Young Avesta as well, where the Uniquely-created Bull is mentioned together with the Bull of Many Species. In the later tradition the Uniquely-created Bull is killed by the Evil Spirit during the primeval attack upon the creation of Ohrmazd, but his semen is emitted into the earth and eventually gives rise to all the animal species.

In the Young Avesta Gaya Martan is also mentioned together with the Cow/Bull of Good Gifts, or simply the Cow/Bull, e.g., in

Y.13.7

We sacrifice (to) the Pre-soul of both the Cow of Good Gifts and the Orderly Gaya Martân.

and

Vr.21.2

We sacrifice the sacrifice and the hymn of the Bull and Gaya.

11.8. *Cosmic structures and weaving*

There is finally some evidence that the cosmos itself seems to be have been conceived of in terms of a pair of huts, an upper one and a lower upside-down one. The cosmos was therefore quite probably imagined as a sphere.

Inside the upper hut, Ahura Mazdâ has placed the celestial lights: the sun, the moon, and the stars, all of which measure out time, as well as mankind, the cow, and other objects of the world of the living, and assigned to them all their proper duties according to the Models.

The covers of these “huts” are said to be woven, and the ancient Iranian creation myth seems to be one of weaving, with Ahura Mazdâ weaving the luminous covers of the day sky every morning as the birth tissues of the new life (*ahu*).

11.9. *The World according to the Young Avesta*

The world is clearly conceived as a great sphere, in the middle of which lies the earth surrounded by the great world ocean, the Vourukasha Sea. In the middle of the earth stands Mount Haraiti, around which the vault of heaven with the sun, moon, and stars revolves.

The earth is divided into seven “climes” (*karshwar*), six of which are arranged around the central clime of Khwaniratha. The seven-fold division is mentioned in the *Gâthâs*, in 1.32.3, where a seventh of the earth seems to be referred to as the dwelling place of the *daêwas*.

Vourubarshti		Vourujarshti
Sawahi	Khwaniratha	Arzahi
Vidadhafshu		Fradadhafshu

Yasht 12 to Rashnu contains a list of the important things the world contains, described as Rashnu flies over them:

- 9 the continent of Arzahi
- 10 the continent of Sawahi (of Life-giving strength?)
- 11 the continent of Fradadhafshu (the cattle-furthering one)
- 12 the continent of Vidadhafshu (the cattle-finding one)
- 13 the continent of Vourubarshti (of
- 14 the continent of Vourujarshti
- 15 this continent of shining Khwaniratha
- 16 the Vourukasha Sea
- 17 that tree of the Falcon, which stands in the middle of the Vourukasha Sea, which is called All-Healer, on which he placed the seeds of all the plants,
- 18 the *waters of the (river) Ranghâ
- 19 the rise of the (river) Ranghâ
- 20 the borders of this earth
- 21 the middle of this earth
- 22 wherever of this earth
- 23 Harâ the tall, with many *turns, bright, rising above the clouds
- 24 Mount Hukairyâ, from which Ardwî Sûrâ Anâhitâ falls down to me a thousand men in height,
- 25 the ridge of high Haraiti, around which my stars, moon, and sun turn,
- 26 the star Vanant (Vega?) created by (Ahura) Mazdâ
- 27 the star Tishtriya (Sirius), wealthy and glorious
- 28 the stars Haptôringa (Big Dipper)
- 29 the stars containing the seed of the waters
- 30 the stars containing the seed of the earth
- 31 the stars containing the seed of the plants
- 32 the stars belonging to the Life-giving Spirit
- 33 yonder moon containing the seed of the cow/bull
- 34 the sun with fleet horses
- 35 the endless lights which have their own law
- 36 the best Existence of the Orderly ones, light and all good breathing space
- 37 the luminous House of Song

In the later, Pahlavi, texts, the continents are described in greater detail. For instance, in the *Ménôy xrad* 8.6, it is said that it is not possible to go from continent to continent without the guidance of the gods or the *dêws*.

See, also, for instance, *Pahlavi Rivayat* 46.9.

12. THE LEGENDARY HISTORY OF IRAN

In the Young Avesta, especially the *Yashts*, a number of legendary characters are listed, always in the same order. In the later tradition these figures are depicted as rulers of the land of Iran. The last of these rulers is Kawi Vishtâspa, who in the later tradition is depicted as having been converted by Zarathustra and becoming his royal patron. In the still(?) later times, the Avestan Vishtâspa was sometimes identified with Darius's father Vishtâspa (Hystaspes), which provided a link between the legendary Avestan period and historical times.

12.1. The mythical age

This first period stretches to the end of the rule of Yima:

Haoshiyangha paradhâta (Hôshang Pêshdâd)

He was the first ruler of the seven-fold earth.¹ Judging from his epithet *paradhâta* Haoshiyangha may be the primordial sacrificer. Old Indic *purohita* in the Rigveda Agni the Fire is frequently referred to as the sacrificer of the gods. The epithet may later have been re-interpreted as meaning “created before (all others)” or “created in the beginning.” He is described in Yasht 9.3-4, 19.25-26.

Taxma Urupi (Tahmûraf)

He mounted the Evil Spirit as his steed and rode on him to the ends of the world. According to the later tradition he saved mankind from extinction. He is described in the Young Avesta in Yt.15.11-12, 19.27-29.

Yima, Pers. Jamshîd.

Yima is one of the figures of common Indo-Iranian mythology to have survived into both Indian and Iranian literature (OInd. Yama). The Indian Yama is the son of the solar figure Vivavant, while Yima is the son of Viwanghwan(t) (slightly different form: Viwanghwah, in the *Gâthâs*) < *Vivasvan.

Yima is a primordial hero, who was associated with a variety of myths in India and Iran. In the Avesta his main characteristics are the following:

1. He makes men and animals immortal, including his father and himself.
2. He expands the earth three times to prevent overpopulation.
3. Yima saves the earth's population of living beings, as well as plants and fires, from complete annihilation by building an enclosure, in which select specimens are housed during the winter.
4. Yima teaches mankind how to use clay form making things.
5. In an act of eugenics Yima is told by Ahura Mazdâ not to let any defective human beings into the enclosure.

In the second chapter of the *Videvdad*, Yima is depicted as the first ruler of living beings: Ahura Mazdâ offers him the function of protector of the Religion, which Yima refuses. Ahura Mazdâ then offers him the function of protector of his creatures, which Yima accepts.

Under Yima's rule the world prospers and the number of people and cattle increases, and as a consequence of the immortality of living beings, the earth becomes too crowded, and so Yima receives two implements from Ahura Mazdâ by which he expands the earth three times: once every 300 years.

After this—any further expansions being apparently impossible—Ahura Mazdâ decides to decimate the population of the earth by a severe winter. Ahura Mazdâ warns Yima of a coming, very severe, winter and describes to him how to make a fortress in which to keep all creatures of Ahura Mazdâ alive during the winter.

¹ According to the later tradition he had two brothers: Wêgerd (Av. Vaêkerta, a land) and Tâz (father of the *tâzîgs* = Arabs).

Among other mythological details contained in the story are the following:

1. Yima makes lights that shine of themselves in the enclosure.
2. In the enclosure the *daēnā* was disseminated by the Karshipta bird.
3. Urwatatnara and Zarathustra were the Life and Model for the inhabitants of the enclosure.

A detail from the beginning of this story is found in the *Hôm yasht* (Y.9.3-5), where we are told that both father and son remained 15 years old.

As ruler of the world Yima is endowed with the Fortune (*khwarnah*). According to the tradition the Fortune left him, however, allegedly on account of a particular sin.

A slightly different version of the story is found in the *Zamyâd yasht* (Yt. 19.30-34), in which the wanderings of the Royal Glory are described, and in particular how it left Yima when he turned his thoughts to uttering a lie:

12.2. The heroic age

After Yima we have the following succession:

Azhi Dahâka (Pers. Zahhâk, Zohhâk): the Giant Dragon (king), who was killed by:

Thraêtaona son of Âthvi (Pahl. Frêdô): slayer of Azhi Dahâka. According to the later tradition Frêdô divided the world between his three sons: Salm, Tûz, and Érij, named after the peoples listed in the *Avesta* in *Yasht* 13.143 as Aryas, Tûriyas, and Sairimas.

Thritha of the Sâmas: the first healer.

Kersâspa of the Sâmas (Pers. Garshâsp): dragon slayer; exacts revenge upon Hitâspa for the slaying of his brother Urwâkhshaya.

12.3. The Kayanids

With the beginning of the succession of the Kawis (cf. Yt. 19.71), which now follows, we enter the time of the great war between the Iranian Kawis and the Turanian leader Frangrasyân, which culminates in the final battle during the reign of Vishtâspa.

In the *yashts*, Frangrasyân's constant intent is said to be the defeat of the Aryan countries. He is, however, never granted any support by the deities whom he implores for help and is finally captured by Haoma during the reign of Kawi Haosrawah. The evidence is obviously too tenuous to allow any conclusions as to who the Turas were or at what time the conflict took place.

This kind of universal battle is commonplace in Indo-European literatures, and the story does not permit us to draw any conclusions about the prehistory of the Iranians and their neighbors. On the contrary, the stories of all the wars the Iranians fought during their early history were probably amalgamated with the traditional story of the Great Battle.

Frangrasyân (Pers. Afrâsiyâb): the Turanian, constant enemy of the Aryan lands in the Kayanid period.

Kawi Kawâta (Pers. Key Qobâd): first Kawi-king.

Kawi Aipivohu.

Kawi Usan (Pers. (Key) Kâ'ûs, Qâbûs).

Kawi Arshan.

Kawi Pisina.

Kawi Biyarshan.

Kawi Siyâwarshan (Pers. Siyâvosh).¹

Kawi Haosrawah (Pers. Key Xosrow): takes revenge for his father Siyâwarshan.

¹ According to Ferdousi Siâvosh was the son of Kay Kâus and a woman descended from Feridun; this son was desired by Kay Kâus's first wife Sudâbe—the wife of Potiphar motif—and later allied with Afrâsiâb but killed by a Turanian. After Kay Khosrow became king he swore a mighty oath to revenge Siâvosh.

It has been a matter of some speculation whether any of these rulers were actually historical figures. If they were, then the Avesta would have preserved valuable historical information about the prehistory of the Iranian tribes in Central Asia after their separation from the Indians. The most exhaustive study on this subject was done by Arthur Christensen in his book on the Kayanian dynasty of Iran, *Les Kayanides*. In it he argued that the rulers who are styled Kawi in the Avesta (Kawi Kawâta, etc.) were most probably historical figures, in contrast to those preceding them, who did not carry this title and were probably just mythological figures (Yima, Thraêtaona, etc.).

That the latter group is comprised of mythological figures is easily proved by the fact that they are common to both the old Indians and the old Iranians and therefore must have belonged to the pre-Iranian traditions of the Indo-Iranians. They can therefore clearly not belong to the early history of the Iranians after they separated from the Indians.

But the list of Kawis, as well, contains at least one figure that is also found in Indian tradition, as shown by Lommel and Dumézil, namely Kawi Usan, who both by name and by the legends associated with him corresponds to Kavi or Kâvya Ushanas in the Indian tradition. There is therefore good reason to conclude that the list of Kawis, as well, contains only mythological figures.

As for the title *kawi* itself, although in the later Zoroastrian tradition and, especially, in the Persian epic tradition, it designates political rulers, there is no evidence in the Avesta that it is used other than as a designation of a special kind of priest. In the *Gâthâs* it is closely related to terms such as *karpan* and *usij*, which both designate special kinds of priests, and its Indian relative *kavi* has nothing to do with political power, but designates the poet priest. The *kawis* listed in the *yashts* are also not described as rulers, for which Avestan has a series of very specific terms consisting of a word for territory plus *paiti* "lord," e.g., *dahyupaiti* "lord of the land." When *kawi* is not used as a title it is commonly found in lists of opponents of the Zoroastrian religion, a notion inherited from the *Gâthâs*, where the *kawis*—other than Kawi Vishtâspa—are portrayed as opponents of Zarathustra.

It seems likely that the Avestan *kawis* were what the term implies, namely poets, that is, the legendary poets of old, frequently referred to in the *Rigveda*.

After Kawi Haosrawah, we reach the time of Zarathustra himself. The principal characters in this part of the legendary history are the following:

Kawi Vishtâspa (Pahl. Kay Wishtâsp, Pers. Goshtâsb)

Zairiwairi (Pahl. Zarêr): brother of Wishtâsp

Jâmâspa: counselor of Wishtâsp

Arjataspa (Pahl. Arzâsp): enemy of Vishtâspa

Spentôdhâta (Pahl. Spandyâd, Pers. Esfandiyâr): son of Vishtâspa.

Humâyâ (Pers. Homâ): daughter of Wishtâsp or daughter and wife of Wahman, mother of Dârâ

In the later tradition Wishtâsp is a king who, together with his minister Jâmâspa, goes to battle against the Khiyonian Arzâsp in the defense of the new faith. Western scholarly literature commonly project this tradition back into Old Avestan times, as well, but there is no evidence in the *Gâthâs* for it.

The Young Avesta, however, contains numerous references to the great battle against the Khiyonians. Thus, in Yt. 5.68, Jâmâspa is said to have sacrificed to Anâhitâ as he confronted an army of followers of the Lie and *daêwa* worshipers, and in Yt. 19 Kawi Vishtâspa is said to have fought for the good Religion. The Avestan passages provide no basis for any interpretation of Kawi Vishtâspa's position other than as a supporter of the *daênâ* of Ahura Mazdâ and Zarathustra, however.

13. ZARATHUSTRA

The name of Zarathustra (Av. Zarathushtra) is mentioned several times in all five *Gâthâs*, but is absent from the *Yasna Haptanghâiti*. It is omnipresent in the *Young Avesta*, where Zarathustra is a mythological figure fighting evil and to whom God communicates all the knowledge needed by mankind. By the end of the nineteenth - beginning of the twentieth centuries, Western scholars had decided — on minimal evidence — that Zarathustra was an historical prophet, who reformed the inherited religion of the Iranians, thus providing Zoroastrianism with a counterpart to other historical (and some non-historical) founders of religions. The *Gâthâs*, it was decided, were his work and contained his teachings; the *Yasna Haptanghâiti* was the work of his more or less immediate followers; and the *Young Avesta* represented, on one hand, pre-Zoroastrian beliefs and, on the other, a relapsed and corrupt form of Zarathustra's teachings.

One of the features that particularly distinguishes Zoroastrianism from Indic (and Indo-European) beliefs is the fact that the Avestan *daêwas* and Old Persian *daivas* are no longer beneficent heavenly beings, but rather the agents of chaos, deception, and evil. To explain this divergence, scholars simply assumed that the reversal of the fortunes of the *daêwas* was the work of a single man and due to a conscious and planned departure from earlier beliefs. That man, they decided, must have been Zarathustra and the new beliefs part of his reform of the traditional religion.

Other features of the beliefs expressed in the Old Avesta diverging from Indian beliefs were classified in the same manner. Thus, the absence from the *Old Avesta* of the names of deities such as Mithra and of the *haoma*, as well as passages apparently implying criticism of the killing of animals, led Western scholars in the first half of the twentieth century to conclude that both the *haoma* sacrifice and the bloody sacrifice were condemned by Zarathustra and that he abolished the worship of gods other than Ahura Mazdâ. Rather, Zarathustra taught monotheism and replaced the ancient ritual practices and “superstitions” by modern-type “meditation” on abstract qualities, “good thought,” etc., interpreted as *ethical* qualities. The presence in later time of the ancient deities, as well as the *haoma* and bloody sacrifices was explained as a *return* to “pagan” practices.

The possibility of historic development and organic evolution on both the Iranian and Indic sides was never seriously discussed.

13.1. History of the world and the Life of Zarathustra in the Zoroastrian tradition

To understand the position of Zarathustra in the ancient Iranian world view, we need to take a look at the way the Iranians imagined the history of the world.

The *Avesta* contains no systematic cosmology or eschatology. For this we have to turn to the Pahlavi texts. These are considerably later and, although conservative, obviously present a more developed and “modern” version of the religion. Nevertheless, in the light of the Pahlavi texts, the isolated references in the *Avesta* can be fitted into larger contexts, as well.

According to the Pahlavi texts, in the beginning, there was a good first principle (Pahlavi *bun*), an upper area, characterized by light and life and inhabited by Ohrmazd. The nether area was characterized by darkness and death and inhabited by Ahrimen, the Foul Spirit (*ganâg mênôy*). At one point in the history of the world, Ahrimen became aware of the world of light and wished to possess it. Ohrmazd devised a plan by which evil would be, in the end, permanently incapacitated.

The plan involved establishing our world: its components were made and put in their proper places, and functions were assigned to them. This “creation” proceeded in several stages, each lasting three thousand years (see Table 1). At the beginning of a first trimillennium, Ohrmazd incapacitated Ahrimen by reciting the *Ahunavairiya* prayer; then, by performing a sacrifice, he established the *world of thought* (*mênôy*), which contained all the heavenly beings.

During a second trimillennium, the *world of living beings* (*gêtîy*) was established, first in the world of thought, like a fetus; then, at the beginning of the third trimillennium period, it was established in the world of living beings itself, like

a thing born. The transition between the two stages coincided with the attack (*ēbgat*) of Ahrimen upon Ohrmazd's creation, which introduced the tri-millennia of "mixture" (*gumēzishn*) of good and evil in the world of living beings.

For another trimillennium, mythical heroes battled human and non-human villains to maintain the creation of Ahura Mazdā, while it slowly assumed its present shape. One of them was Yima (Old Indic Yama; in Young Avestan also called *Yima khshaēta* "*radiant Yima," Pahlavi Jamshēd, Persian Jamshid), during whose reign living beings were immortal, which caused a population explosion that had to be halted by a series of natural catastrophes (harsh winters, floods). Yima's rule was followed by the millennial rule of the Giant Dragon (Avestan *azhi dahāka*, Pahlavi Azhdahāg, Persian Zohāq), who was finally killed by the dragon-slaying hero Thraētaona (Pahlavi Frēdōn, Persian Feridun); and so on.

The last millennium of this age witnessed the battle between a succession of *kawis*, poet-sacrificers, against the arch-villain Frangrasyān (Pahlavi Frāsiyāb, Persian Afrāsiyāb). The death of Frangrasyān and the end of the rule of the last of the great *kawis* fighting him (Avestan Haosrawangha, Pahlavi Husrōy, Persian Khosrow) close this trimillennium and prepares for the next, characterized by the "coming of the *dēn*."¹ The two periods are bridged by Kawi Vishtāspa (Pahlavi Kay Wishtāsp, Persian Key Goshtāsp), during whose reign Zarathustra is born.

In the Pahlavi texts, Kay Wishtāsp is followed by two rulers: Wahman, son of Spandyād (Persian Esfandiyār), and a queen, Humāy. In the modern Persian epic, Ferdousī's *Shāh-nāmē*, Book of Kings (ca. 1000 C.E.), which, for the pre-Achaemenid period, is to a large extent based upon the Zoroastrian tradition, Key Goshtāsp, last of the Kayanid dynasty, comes just before the Achaemenids. His daughter Homā is said to be the mother of Dārā (Darius).

The linking of the dynasties of the legendary Kayanids and the historical Achaemenids may, in fact, have taken place when Darius's father Vishtāspa was identified with Kawi Vishtāspa in the post-Achaemenid tradition.

13.2. The Life of Zarathustra in the Zoroastrian tradition.

The *Avesta* contains few details about Zarathustra. In the *Young Avesta*, Zarathustra is presented as a mythical figure, a first human poet-sacrificer, a founder of society, and law-giver, as well as an epic hero, who aids Ahura Mazdā and the good deities in protecting the world of living beings from evil by banning the evil spirit and the "old gods" (*daēwas*) from this earth. On the "Zarathustra image" in the *Old Avesta*, see below.

In the Pahlavi books, especially in book seven of the *Dēnkard* (discussed in detail by Molé [posthumously 1963] and edited and translated with detailed commentary by him [posthumously 1967]), Zarathustra (Pahlavi Zardusht or Zardukhsht) is presented as a mythical figure made by Ohrmazd and sent down into the world of living beings at the end of the three millennia of "mixture" to combat evil in the world and initiate the return of the cosmos to its original state. According to the Pahlavi books, this process will occupy the last trimillennium of the world.

The making of Zarathustra is told in the *Dēnkard* in some detail: Ohrmazd first transmitted Zarathustra's "fortune" (*xwarrah*) via the fire to his birth mother (*burdār*) (*Dk.* 7.2.2-3); then his "pre-soul" (*frawahr*, which had been fashioned at the time of the attack by the Evil Spirit) came via the *hōm* (= *haoma*) to his parents (*Dk.* 7.2.14); and finally his "body substance" (*tan gōhr*) via the rain (= water) to the plants (*Dk.* 7.2.37-38) and from the plants into the milk of a cow (*Dk.* 7.2.40). Zarathustra's mother mixed the milk with the *hōm*, and this mixture was then drunk by his parents (*Dk.* 7.2.46-47). When his mother conceived, the "fortune," "pre-soul," and "substance" all came together (*Dk.* 7.2.52). We see that the birth of Zarathustra is parallel to the Zoroastrian sacrifice. The *Dēnkard* also reports that he laughed at birth (*Dk.* 5.2.5, 7.3.2), a story also found in non-Zoroastrian sources.

According to the Pahlavi texts, the living Zarathustra was brought by Wahman to his first meeting with Ohrmazd at the age of thirty, at the turn of the millennium.

The last trimillennium, thus introduced by the appearance of Zarathustra, will be punctuated by the birth of his three

¹ Although often translated as "religion," we must keep in mind that "religion" can not have had the same implications at this time as it has in modern times.

sons, by whose sacrifices the world will gradually return to its pristine, perfect, state, that of the original world of thought, the Perfectioning (Avestan *frashô.kerti-*, Pahlavi *frashkerd*).

In the still later tradition, as reflected in the Muslim-period *Shâh-nâme*, the entire cast of Avestan mythical and legendary characters are presented as historical rulers and heroes. Here we also find Zarathustra (Zardusht) in the role of prophet (*payghambar*).

13.3. The life of Zarathustra in the Classical Sources

In the Greek and Latin literature, Zoroaster's time is variously given as some time in the Achaemenid period or 6000/5000 years before the war of Troy, Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont, or Plato.¹ Other details about Zoroaster are scarce. The authors often mention him as the source of various religious practices; for instance, Xanthus, who wrote in the fifth century B.C.E. even before Herodotus, has the following note, quoted in the first century B.C.E. by Nicolaus of Damascus (Jackson, 1899, p. 232; Fox and Pemberton, p. 1):

As for Zoroaster, the Persians claim that it was from him they derived the rule against burning dead bodies or defiling fire in any other way, and that after this rule had been followed for a long time they finally established it as a custom.

Herodotus himself, who actively sought information about Iranian religions, mentions Zoroaster nowhere, either in his description of the history of the Achaemenid kings or in those of the Median, Persian, and Scythian religions; nor does Ctesias of Cnidus, who was a hostage and physician at the court of Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.E.) and whose *History of the Persians* was probably written in the second half of the fourth century; and nor does Xenophon (ca. 430-354 B.C.E.), who wrote about his journey through Iranian Mesopotamia as a mercenary in the defeated army of Cyrus the Younger in 400 B.C.E. and the upbringing of Cyrus the younger and his religious customs.

Plato (428/7-349/8), in the tenth book of the *Republic* according to Clement of Alexandria (Jackson, 1899, p. 240; Fox and Pemberton, pp. 73-74), reports that Zoroaster himself had written that he was the son of Armenius of Pamphylia and had written an account of what he learned from the gods on a trip to Hades. According to Plato, Zoroaster was supposed to have lain on the pyre for twelve days before he came back to life.

Aristotle (384/3-322) in various places cites the date of Zoroaster as 6000 years before Plato and also that of the Magi, whom he “juxtaposed ... to Pherecydes as well as to Empedocles and Anaxagoras, therefore to Greek philosophers of the 6th and 5th centuries” and “stated in book I of *On Philosophy* that the Magi were older than the Egyptians, as Diogenes Laertius attests in his *Proem* (I, 8)” (Gnoli, 2000, p. 95).

In the pseudo-Platonic *Alcibiades*, reference is made to the teaching of “the magic doctrine of Zoroaster, (son) of Horomazdas.”² “The doctrines of Zoroaster, the son of Ormazdeus” are also mentioned by Agathias (ca. 536-82), who adds that the modern Persians say he lived at the time of Hystaspes, but that it is impossible to tell whether this was Hystaspes the father of Darius or another of the same name (Jackson, 1899, p. 248; Fox and Pemberton, p. 115).

Pliny the Elder's (23-79 C.E.) *Natural History* contains the story about Zarathustra's laughter on the day he was born, also known from the Zoroastrian tradition (see below), and that he lived in the desert on cheese so carefully cured for twenty years that he did not perceive its age, as well as his date as 6000 years before the death of Plato. He also cites Hermippus to the effect that “Zoroaster composed two million lines of verse in the indices to his books” and that his teacher was a certain Azonaces (Jackson, 1899, p. 234; Fox and Pemberton, pp. 44-46). Zoroaster's laughter at birth is later mentioned by Augustine (354-430) in the *City of God* (Jackson, 1899, p. 246; Fox and Pemberton, p. 99). Augustine points out that his laughter portended nothing good, since he was then defeated by the Assyrian king Ninus

¹ See Jackson, 1899, *Zoroaster*; Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* III, 1991, “Excursus”; Gnoli, 2000, *Zoroaster in History*; Kellens, 2001, “Zoroastre dans l'histoire ou dans le mythe?”.

² Fox and Pemberton, 1929, p. 22, have “the prophet of Horomazus,” but the Greek text has only the genitive of the god's name, which usually means “son of.”

(see below).

Another miracle story was told by Dio Chrysostom (b. ca. 50 C.E.) in connection with his discussion of the chariots of the sun and Zeus (Jackson, 1899, p. 236; Fox and Pemberton, p. 48). In search for wisdom, Zoroaster withdrew to a mountain (perhaps related to Pliny the Elder's story just cited), after which a fire fell down upon it from the sky and set it on fire. When the king and his followers came there to pray, Zoroaster emerged unharmed and told them to offer certain sacrifices.¹ Subsequently he joined the Magians.

From around 100 C.E. and onward, Zoroaster is depicted as a Bactrian king and a contemporary of Queen Semiramis of Babylon and the adversary of Ninus (see Jackson, 1899, pp. 154-57). The same tradition is mentioned by Justin in the *Epitome* of Trogus Pompeius's *Histories* (Fox and Pemberton, p. 69) and by Aelius Theo in his list of women who were stronger than their male adversaries (Jackson, 1899, p. 237; Fox and Pemberton, pp. 59-60). This story was reported earlier by Diodorus Siculus on the authority of Ctesias (ca. 400 B.C.E.), according to whom, however, Semiramis's adversary was called Oxyartes (Fox and Pemberton, p. 30).² It eventually made its way into King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon chronicle by Paulus Orosius (5th cent. C.E.) and the preface of Snorri's *Younger Edda*.

Zoroaster's connection with the Chaldeans of Mesopotamia is reported from Alexander Polyhistor (1st cent. B.C.E.) by Georgius Syncellus (d. after 810 C.E.): "Zoroastres and the seven kings of the Chaldeans who succeeded him ... reigned in all for one hundred and ninety sun-years" (Jackson, 1899, p. 252; Fox and Pemberton, p. 121).

The popular etymology of Zoroaster's name as "someone who sacrifices to the stars" (*astrophútēs*) is found for the first time in Diogenes Laertius (fl. ca. 210 C.E.; Jackson, 1899, p. 241; Fox and Pemberton, pp. 80-81); it is interpreted as "living star" in Gregory of Tours (ca. 538-93; Jackson, 1899, p. 250; Fox and Pemberton, p. 117). The Classical sources also give his name as Zaratas or Zaradas.

We see that the oldest Greek sources are barely cognizant of Zarathustra and that historical connections are of two kinds: connections or synchronisms with Greek thinkers and with an otherwise unknown Bactrian-Babylonian conflict. The Classical sources, therefore, are as inconclusive on this subject as the Zoroastrian tradition itself.

13.4. Historicity of Zarathustra

By the turn of the century, the view had taken firmly root that the Old Avestan Zarathustra was historical: a prophet, reformer, thinker, etc., while the Young Avestan and later Zarathustra was a myth or legend, but with several surviving historical details.

It was also about this time that the argument from the vivid and personal description of Zarathustra in the *Gāthās* became common. Thus, Karl Friedrich Geldner, author of the chapter on the Avestan literature in the *Grundriss*, put it as follows:

In the *Gāthās*, [the personality of Zarathustra] appears far less legendary and comes closer to us as human ... The relationship to his patrons, especially King Vishtāspa and his advisors, stands out in more lifelike fashion and more clearly. The subjective and personal emphasis prevails. ...³

As we shall see, this argument remained for the whole of the twentieth century and was gradually coupled with the opinion that the poems show such an advanced level of abstraction and ethical contents that Zarathustra *must* have been an historical person.

The problem of the historical Zarathustra is not a simple one, however, but a complex of questions: Does the *Old*

¹ Both stories are related to the story of Zarathustra's conversion of Wishtāsp in *Dk. 7.4.63-86* (see Molé, 1967, *La légende de Zoroastre*).

² This was also the name of a noble Bactrian, the father of Roxana, whom Alexander married. The occurrence of the name in Ctesias may therefore be an indication that the text was adjusted after Alexander (Ctesias of Cnidus, *Histoires de l'Orient*, ed. J. Auberger, Paris, 1991, p. 145 n. 16; see also Gnoli, 2000, pp. 43-44). Ctesias does not mention the name of Zoroaster.

³ Geiger and Kuhn, *Grundriss*, vol. II, p. 29.

Avesta present Zarathustra as its author?¹ Does the text itself contain indications that Zarathustra was an historical person? If so, does it present a reformed religion? If so, what does the reform consist in, and is there evidence that the reform was that of a single historical individual or the result of a gradual development? If Zarathustra was a historical reformer and the author of the *Old Avesta*, is there any evidence that this text contains his entire teaching?² Notably, was what is not in the *Gāthās* deliberately excluded by Zarathustra — for instance, deities such as Haoma, Mithra, Anāhitā, Vayu, etc.? And so on.

Since the world view of the *Young Avesta*, which post-dates the *Old Avesta* probably by a few hundred years, perhaps as much as half a millennium, is commonly agreed to contain elements that were *not* part of Zarathustra's reform, yet continues Indo-Iranian traditions, one has assumed that the Young Avestan religion to a large extent reflects *post-Zarathustrian* developments or even a return to *pre-Zarathustrian* — sometimes referred to as “pagan” — beliefs kept intact outside of the community of the followers of the prophet. Most importantly, the mythical image of Zarathustra — the only one found in the *Young Avesta* — is regarded as a post-Zarathustrian development. This view was already in place about the turn of the century and remained common throughout the first half of the century. It was expressed by Lommel as follows:

In the *Gathas*, [the personality of Zarathustra] appears far less legendary and comes closer to us as human ... The relationship to his patrons, especially King Vishtāspa and his advisors, stands out in more lifelike fashion and more clearly. The subjective and personal emphasis prevails. ...³

In more recent times, scholars have rarely discussed Zarathustra's historicity, but the above arguments are occasionally quoted, cf. Boyce (1992, p. 113):

Yet he is also drawn into the divine and mythic worlds, and thereby piously transformed from the recognizably real figure of the *Gathas* into a revered, semi-legendary one.

We must not forget, however, that these opinions were based upon interpretations of the *Gāthās* as understood at the time, especially a few “pillar passages”; but, like the rest of the *Gāthās*, these passages contain their fair share of, if not more than usual, words of uncertain or unknown meaning and unclear syntax and so permit various interpretations.

Few scholars in the second half of the twentieth century tried to replace or add to the old argument with other arguments (only Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, see below), and the historicity of Zarathustra was not usually questioned or discussed among Western scholars. Thus, a typical introduction to the study of Zarathustra is that of Lommel (1930, p. 3): “When and where Zarathustra lived, no one knows.” The absence of a third question (which ought to be the first): *whether* Zarathustra lived, leaps to the eye. Similarly, for instance, Gnoli (1987, p. 557): “Other than the names of his father ... and of his mother ... we know almost nothing of Zarathustra's life.” The implication of these statements is obviously that there is no historical or archeological evidence for his existence, which must therefore be deduced in other ways.

Recently, an argument has also been put forward based on the form and structure of the poems to the effect that the high degree of sophistication of the poetic techniques involved point to Zarathustra as their author.

The poet's complaint.

The *Gāthās* contain the *topos* of an (apparent) “self-dramatization” of the poet as poor, persecuted, etc., which

¹ Obviously, the *Gāthās* had an author, but the notion of “author” in oral traditions is very vague.

² Bartholomae, in fact, suggested they might be “*excerpts* from sermons” rather than complete sermons.

³ Lommel, 1930, *Die Religion Zarathustras*, p. 4: “Nevertheless, the teacher who, in the *Gāθās*, speaks to us as a living real person, is, in the *Young Avesta*—also in what are presumably its older parts—a completely legendary and mythical personality.”

belonged to the center piece of the proof of Zarathustra's historicity to Bartholomae, Lommel, Boyce, etc.

A Poet's Complaint is found in *Gâthâs 1-4*. It is missing in the fifth *Gâthâ*, the structure of which differs from that of the others, and in the *Yasna Haptanghâiti*, which is a "collective" hymn.

In the second *Gâthâ*, the Poet's complaint comes in Yasna 46, which contains the themes of the Social Conflict, the Contest, and the Conclusion. The Complaint itself is brief (2.46.1-2), serving as an introduction to the larger theme of the Social Conflict. The poet-sacrificer complains about his weakness and poverty, caused by his lack of earth, men, and animals, as well as lack of approval, apparently, by his own people. In the first line of 2.46.1 traditional scholarship has seen an indication of Zarathustra's intent to leave his home land and go to preach his message in another "land"; however, *zam* never means "land" in the sense of a political unit and "foreign land," but only "earth, ground," especially in connection with "working the earth." The connection of *zam-* with *nem-* "bend, bow" is also typically used together with *Ârmaiti*, genius of the earth or the earth itself. In the second strophe (2.46.2), the poet-sacrificer complains about his "weakness," recalling the Soul of the Cow's complaint about Zarathustra's "weakness." This then serves as a pretext for asking for support and a munificent reward.

All these passages have serious problems of interpretation and can obviously not be used to reconstruct Zarathustra's life.

13.5. Non-historicity of Zarathustra

Not all nineteenth-century Iranists endorsed the historicity of Zarathustra – Spiegel was an exception, but in the twentieth century the assumption was only challenged in the late nineteen-fifties early nineteen-sixties by Marijan Molé (Molé, 1963). Molé concluded that it was impossible to make inferences about history from the Zoroastrian texts (p. 524), but he died young, and his work was later not often referred to.

More recently, however, a few scholars have continued this approach and tried to show that it is possible to discuss and describe the Avesta and the ancient Iranian religion without the assumption of an historical Zarathustra. In this way the problem has been transformed into one of determining *which description is the more likely to represent a real religion in the time and place in question*.

One cannot, of course, to produce rigorous arguments and proofs. The texts simply do not permit that. In our case, however, not only the fact that scholars in, say, the second half of the twentieth century have not re-examined the original arguments, which were obviously representative of their times, in order to make a new case using modern methodologies (in history, the history of religions, comparative mythology, oral literature, etc.) for Zarathustra's being an historical person, that his religion broke with that of his parents, etc., but also the fact that the assumption of Zarathustra's historicity has not led to a relative consensus among scholars about the basic data of his life or teaching – all of this leaves the doors open for *other* possible interpretations of the sources at our disposal.

The main question is also not whether the Zarathustra of the *Gâthâs* was a historical person, however, but, once we assume he was, what then? Assuming his historicity, whether we place him in the second millennium B.C.E. or in the Median-Achaemenid periods, there is no supporting historical or archeological evidence for his existence in time and place and hence for the society in which he grew up or what influences he was exposed to during childhood and adolescence. As we shall see, the textual evidence is minimal, and, in the past, all this has been supplied by those who reconstruct his life and thought, and the results have depended on each scholar's personal opinions. The alternative is obviously to approach the texts without the presumption about Zarathustra and read them on their own premises as a specimen of ancient Indo-Iranian literature. If such an "objective" reading of the texts leads one to assume an historical Zarathustra, then all is well; if not, one may as well leave him out of the equation.

13.6. Approaches to the Old Avesta

The debate in the West over Zarathustra's reform and teaching has also made the texts assumed to have been composed by him, the Old Avestan *Gâthâs*, recently with promotion of the *Yasna Haptanghâiti*, one of the most controversial of ancient Indo-European texts, and there is less general agreement about what they mean grammatically than about what they refer to. This state of affairs is usually – and often justifiably, of course – ascribed to the obscurity of the language and the esoteric contents. Thus M. Boyce (1975, p. 20) characterized “the teachings of Zoroaster himself” as “enveloped in the sublime obscurities of his great *zaotar* verses” and the *Gâthâs* (1978, p. 603) as “magnificently obscure hymns.”

The obscurity, however, is, in my view, also caused in part, at least, by the effort to interpret them according to what is *thought* to be the teaching of their author, Zarathustra. In fact, while pointing out the obscurity of the texts, scholars have yet proceeded to determine in great detail what their author felt, thought, and taught.

Far into the second half of the century, the interpretation of these texts was basically that from around the turn of the nineteenth century, when major publications on Zarathustra and the Avesta cemented the already existing opinion that the *Gâthâs* represented a break with tradition, a new and reformed religion that was the work of a single man, a prophet, philosopher, and reformer. This image of the prophet and his life and Bartholomae's translation of the *Gâthâs*, Zarathustra's “sermons in verse,” were widely accepted, and subsequent scholarship mainly occupied itself with refining them.¹

On the other hand, it was recognized early on that, on the whole, the style of the *Gâthâs* was that of Indo-Iranian and even Indo-European poetics. The fact, however, that the Old Avestan poet used the same terminology of the sacrifice and poetic formulas as the Rigvedic poet was interpreted by some as a conscious choice on the part of Zarathustra (see Lommel, below), an opinion that also endured.²

More recently, Thieme (1975, p. 35 = *Kleine Schriften*, p. 1127) described the pre-Zoroastrian elements in the *Gâthâs* as “new wine in old bags,”³ and Puhvel (1987, pp. 38-39) suggested that Iran is less directly useful for the reconstruction of Indo-European myth “owing to the dislocation and overlays of the Zoroastrian reform,” but “[s]craping off the barnacles of the Zoroastrian sea change, we reach a readily inferrable Proto-Iranian level.”

Though Bartholomae's grammatical analysis of the Old Avestan texts was seriously criticized and modified in the early nineteen-fifties, especially by the work of Helmut Humbach, who considered many of Bartholomae's text emendations arbitrary and syntactical analyses wayward, yet his ideas about the contents of the texts are still very much in vogue. Humbach, like others before him, in his German edition of the *Gâthâs* (1959), emphasized the importance of comparing the *Gâthâs* with the Vedic hymns, but also the fact that the poems were not priestly sermons, but hymns of praise addressed to God, for which the poet was entitled to a reward, and he stressed their ritual character.

Scholars still differed significantly about such details of Zarathustra's life as his date (ranging from ca. 1500 B.C.E. – the “early date”, via ca. 1000 B.C.E., to ca. 500 B.C.E. – the “late date”), as well as details of his teaching, and, in his contribution to a colloquium on the Achaemenid religion in 1987, Kellens suggested that the fact that it has not been possible for scholars, on the basis of Bartholomae's premises, to agree on the details of Zarathustra's life and teaching shows this approach to be inadequate (Kellens, 2000, *Essays*, p. 29):

The fact that the research, by postulating a founder, has not been able to articulate the various manifestations of

¹ For a survey of modern attitudes, see J. Kellens and C. Herrenschmidt, “La question du rituel dans le mazdéisme ancien et achéménide,” *Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions* 85, 1994, pp. 45-48; Skjærvø, 1997, p. 106.

² The same scenario has been suggested in Christian studies, cf. Schweitzer in the introduction to the English 3rd ed.: “Critical study cannot remain blind to the Jewish eschatological material found in the utterances of Jesus according to the two oldest Gospels ... It was originally thought possible to reconcile this with the conviction that he wanted to be a purely spiritual Messiah and set himself to found a purely spiritual Kingdom of God, by supposing that he used the traditional terminology in order to make himself understood.”

³ Thieme, *Kleine Schriften*, p. 1127: “Who will reject the thought that we are dealing with old wine filled into new bags?”

Mazdaism in a coherent picture that might receive a relative consensus ought to make us extremely skeptical toward the premises.

It has been said that Zoroastrian studies have been through even more revolutions and reforms than Zoroastrianism. This is not quite true, however, since Zoroastrian studies have remained remarkably stable for almost a century in scholars' approaches to Zoroastrianism and the results obtained – however they may have translated the *Gâthâs*.

14. ESCHATOLOGY

In the *Gâthâs* “last things” are frequently mentioned. Put most simply, the Gathic concept is that the good will go to the house of Ahura Mazdâ and live on in bliss, while the bad will go to the house of the Lie (hell), where they will live in misery until the end of the world.

Life is frequently conceived of in terms of a giant (horse) race, the winners of which are declared at the “final turn.” This image is also used of the poet and his poems, which vie with those of the competitors for first place in the race toward the gods. It is therefore not always clear which of the two big “races” are being alluded to, but probably the last one is reflected or foreshadowed by the first.

At the Ford of the Accountant (the *Chinwadpuhl* of the later tradition), a questioning takes place, at which the “tallies” for good thoughts, etc., are counted up. As a result of the accounting, the rewards are distributed: good or bad.

The story of what happens to the soul after death is told in several Avestan (*Videvdad* chap. 19, *Hâdôkht nask*) and Pahlavi texts (e.g., *Bundahishn* chap. 30, *Mênôy Khrad* chap. 2).

According to the Pahlavi texts, the damned suffer unspeakable punishments in hell. The *Book of Ardâ Wirâz*, in particular, contains a catalogue of such punishments that closely resembles Dante's *Divina Commedia*. In this text, the Righteous (*ardâ*) *Wirâz* is sent into the beyond to verify the credibility of the religion as practiced at his time (3rd cent. C.E.?). He visits heaven and hell, as well as the intermediate area reserved for those whose good thoughts, etc., equaled their bad thoughts, etc.

In the later tradition, the course of the world passes through four periods of 3,000 years, but it is not clear from the Young Avesta to what extent this scheme had been developed already at that time. According to the later tradition human history takes place in the third millennium, and during the last millennium three sons of Zarathustra,¹ whose semen has been preserved in Lake Kiyânsê, are born from three virgins who come down to the lake to bathe. These three sons are the *saoshyants*, “Life-givers” or “Revitalizers” become the leaders in the final battle against Evil

Av.

Ukhshyat-erta “he who makes Order grow”

Ukhshyat-nemah “he who makes reverence (the earth) grow”

Astwat-erta “he through whom Order receives bones”

Pahl.

Ushêdar

Ushêdarmâh

Sôshâns

Most of the known details of the Young Avestan *saoshyant* Astwaterta are from the *Zamyâd yasht* (Yt. 19), in which the story of the “(divine) Fortune” (*khwarnah*) is told, while the Pahlavi books, notably the *Bundahishn*, contain details about all three.

By the sacrifices of each of the three, the world will start returning to its original state, and the third and last of the three sons, the *saoshyant* par excellence, Pahlavi Sôshâns, will bring about the return to the origins, bringing about the “Perfectioning” (*frashkerd*).

The world experiences several setbacks, however.

During the millennium of Ushêdar, there will be a terrible rain followed by a harsh winter lasting three years, during

¹ Other sons of Zarathustra include Urwcontinent V.2.43, Yt.13.98) and Isat,vâstra (Yt.13.98, Bdh.34.10).

which almost all of mankind is killed. The world is then filled up from Yima's (Jamshēd's) enclosure.

Toward the end of Ushēdarmāh's millennium, the Giant Dragon, Azhdahāg, breaks his chains and causes much devastation in the world. Several heroes who have been lying sleeping in various places are awakened to combat each their opponents. The dragon-slayer Kersāspa is awakened to slay Azhdahāg.

Toward the end of human existence, the Fortune will come to the *saoshyant* Astwaterta, son of Vīspa.taurwairī (she who will overcome all (evils)," and he will lead the battle against Evil. He will raise the dead, and Zarathustra's son Isadwāstar gathers all mankind, whose good and bad deeds are revealed. For three days and nights the evil will be tortured in hell. Then the heavenly dragon Gōchihr falls down from heaven and sets the earth on fire. The metal in the mountains is smelted and pours into a giant river, through which humanity must pass. The good pass through without discomfort, while the evil have the rest of their evil burnt out of them.

The final sacrifices in the world of the living will be performed by Zarathustra and Wishtāsp and in the world of thought by Ohrmazd and Srōsh. Thereby, the Final Body will be produced, and the world will be Perfect. The Lie will be overcome and banished to its original abode, and the Evil Spirit shall no longer have any power. Death will be overcome and banished, and mankind will return to the state it lived in under the rule of Yima, being again indestructible.

15. THE SACRIFICE (YASNA)

The Old Avestan texts are ritual texts in the sense that they are recited during the *yasna* ritual, the Zoroastrian *haoma* sacrifice. The vocabulary is to a large extent ritual, that is, it contains specific terms for addressing the gods and for ritual actions and objects.

The ritual is the means of communicating with the other world and the sacrificial ground the place where this happens. The communication is vital, because it keeps the world going, upholding the values of good existence and withstanding the pressures from evil existence. For this purpose the gods must be supported, as they are the guardians of the cosmic order and the principal opponents of the forces of evil. The sacrifice is therefore directed at the gods, and they are the ones that receive its "first fruits." The all-important immortality of the gods is conferred upon them and maintained by the sacrifice, and they in turn bestow well-being: freedom from illnesses and long life on the commissioner and performer of the sacrifice and peace and fertility on their community. There is thus complete interdependence between the two spheres: that of men and that of gods.

The sacrifice is not a binary system, however, but a trinary one. This is not seen very clearly in Iran, but in India, the this-worldly participants in the sacrifice are two: the *yajamāna* "sacrificer," or "patron," as we would call him, and the poet-sacrificer who performs the ritual, the "libator." The patron is the one who has commissioned the ritual, who will reap the benefits from it, and who will have to pay the performer of the sacrifice—here referred to as the poet-sacrificer—his fee. In Iran, the role of the patron is never emphasized either in the texts or in studies of Iranian religion. The latter omission is commonly explained by assuming that Zarathustra's (alleged) message or teachings are too lofty to be distracted by such material concerns as jobs and salaries. In the Old Avestan texts, however, the patron is clearly present as the one in charge of the material fee (*mizhda*), only obscured by the mythico-ritual identifications among the actors in the tripartite drama that is being played out.

The poet-sacrificer's job is to perform a successful ritual, a performance of "sympathetic magic" in a religious setting, whereby the desired cosmic events are reenacted and so made happen. There always exists, however, the possibility that his ritual may not be successful and so produce the opposite result, cf. S. Lévi's summing up of the Old Indic sacrifice as described in the late Vedic texts, the Brahmanas:

... the sacrifice, which regulates the relations between man and the gods, is a mechanical operation that acts by its own internal energy. It is hidden deep inside the nature, and only comes out by the magical action of the priest. The worried and evil gods find themselves forced to capitulate, overcome and subjected by the very force that gave them their greatness. In spite of them, the sacrificer rises all the way up to the heavenly world and secures for

himself a definitive place: man becomes superhuman. But, although the gain is considerable, it is a tricky role to play. Once the force of the sacrifice is released, it acts blindly. He who does not know how to tame it is broken by it, and the jealousy of the gods who are awaiting their chance willingly takes upon itself to complete the work. Being experts in rituals they hasten to turn the errors to their profit in order to defend their threatened positions.

The poet-sacrificer has several means of preventing the sacrifice from backfiring: he can ask the gods for a sign by which he can be confident that his ritual is correct; he can insert in the text of his hymns a “safety clause,” inserted at various places in the hymns to obviate the possibility that his performance might 1. not be adequate or flawed, 2. arouse the gods’ anger, 3. omit important names. The poet-sacrificer states that his performance is according to his means and powers, and he asks for the gods’ leniency and mercy and forgiveness for “sins,” i.e., (ritual) errors.

The purpose of the sacrifice.

The ritual reproduces Ahura Mazdā’s primeval sacrifice, by which he established the Ordered cosmos, and its purpose is the revitalization of this cosmos, now constantly under attack by the forces of darkness and destruction. During the ritual the poet-sacrificer, on behalf of his patron and community, returns to Ahura Mazdā what he, during his first ordering action, gave to the world to use, but which still belongs to him. These sacred objects—sacred because of divine origin—by their circulation between the divine and human spheres as gifts and counter-gifts, confer upon these two spheres all the profits of the gift exchange.¹

There are three kinds of sacred objects: 1. the ritual thoughts, words, and actions; 2. the objects manipulated during the actions, among them the ritual refreshments intended for the gods; 3. the constituent substance of the world/macrocosmos and men/microcosmos: its vital spirit and bones. All three types are explicitly said to have originated with Ahura Mazdā and to be returned to him during the ritual. Once made by Ahura Mazdā these sacred objects were brought down to earth by Zarathustra, and the worshippers consecrate them and offer them in return to Ahura Mazdā for his enjoyment.

Bad poets and inefficient rituals.

How could evil have gotten into the Ordered cosmos of Ahura Mazdā? By a wrong ritual, a ritual inviting the wrong gods, informed by the bad *manyu*, based on the wrong choice. *Our* poet exhorts the sustainers of Order not to listen to them, as in 1.31.18, where “But let no one among you keep listening to the formulas and the teachings of the one possessed by the Lie!,” which echoes 1.29.8 “who … listens to our ordinances, Zarathustra Spītāma.” In 2.44.20 the *karpan* and the *usij* are said to “give the cow to Wrath,” and in 3.48.10 our poet expresses his disgust at them for working ineffective rituals, unable to bring back the sun and make the earth prosper (see below), for this they are condemned to failure because (4.51.14) “the mumblers (do) not abide by the deals” and to failure and ridicule in 5.53.8.

The performance of the bad poet-sacrificer is characterized by mediocrity and wrong performances, expressed in part in the vocabulary of the Old Avestan texts by a special set of words or forms reserved for them.

The Contest, chariot race

The poet-sacrificer, getting ready to assist Ahura Mazdā in his fight against the Lie and to improve his own circumstances, prepares his sacrifice and sends his sacrifice and praises up to the other world. The praises take the shape of chariots with his tongue as charioteer. But the rival poet-sacrificers prepare their own sacrifices and send their own praise songs. The competing praises therefore take the form of a contest or competition, more specifically, a horse and chariot race, in which the quality of the poems and the poets determine who will be the winner.

The same holds true of the Rigvedic poet according to Louis Renou: “in order to restore the ambiance in which the hymns moved, we must recover, beneath the description of the actions of the cult or the mythical facts, the poet’s major

¹ See M. Godelier, *L’énigme du don*, Paris, 1996; Eng. transl. N. Scott, *The Enigma of the Gift*, Chicago, 1999.

concern, upon which his future and that of his community depended, namely, success in the literary contest.” And, finally, “the poet thinks about his work, about the demands of the rhetoric contest (*lutte oratoire*), he fears failure, he hopes for success ... The composition, the poetic technique, in this sense, becomes a purpose in itself.”

Mutual dependence

To reestablish and maintain cosmos and Order, Ahura Mazdā needs the assistance of his creatures, specifically humans, among whom this function is assigned to the poet-sacrificer, who performs the function as Ahura Mazdā’s assistant through his ritual: the hymns and the sacrifices, but only after he has been approved, declared competent, by winning a(n) imaginary poetic competition.

The gift-giving principle of “gifts and counter-gifts” presupposes a situation of mutual dependence between the divine and the ritual spheres, and it is the poet-sacrificer who is in charge of seeing to it that the relationship functions. Thus, Ahura Mazdā and the poet-sacrificer constitute the two poles of the ritual-mythical universe, between which everything else is arranged and, like in a battery, is energized through them. The poet-sacrificer who is approved by Ahura Mazdā is the one who knows what was, is, and will be, knowledge imparted to him by Ahura Mazdā, something that defines him as a “seer” or “prophet” in Western terminology.

In this perspective, then, the poet-sacrificer is the communicator, without whom the society would be cut off from divine favor and support, on one hand, and without whom the Order of nature could not be reestablished, at least not properly. The communication between the two spheres is maintained by means of “speaking/hearing” and “seeing,” on both sides: both the poet-sacrificer and the gods who are the targets of his ritual, with its acts and words, must be able to “see” and, especially, “hear.” The existence of a hearing and seeing performers and audience, is therefore a key concept.

If the poet-sacrificer is approved by Ahura Mazdā it means that he has the necessary knowledge about the origin and nature of the world. Thus, he knows that in the beginning there were two twin, but antagonistic, mental forces/inspirations, asleep or in *statu nascendi*, and that Ahura Mazdā by the agency of the life-giving inspiration is the god who originally established or by engendering brought forth Order in the universe, making it into an Ordered cosmos, by assigning their proper place and time (*ratu*) to all objects in it. It was Ahura Mazdā who determined what would be good life and behavior for human beings. The poet-sacrificer also knows that Chaos, that is, the denial of Order, or the Lie, by the agency of the evil, or destructive mental force, periodically takes over, as it was not removed from the world through Ahura Mazdā’s cosmogonic/cosmetic activities and is reactivated by the rituals of the poet-sacrificers who are the partisans of the Lie, being themselves possessed by it, as it were. The cosmos must therefore also be periodically reestablished.

But he also knows that his ritual space—with its hallowed ground, its ordered arrangement, its fire, its officiating priests, and its sacrifices—is an exact counterpart of the original Ordered cosmos, he is himself filled with life-giving strength, and he becomes the *Life-giving Man* (see below), whereby he also obtains the same command that allowed Ahura Mazdā to overcome Chaos the first time. Endowed with this command he joins, through his perfect ritual, Ahura Mazdā in the fight against the forces of evil and darkness, strengthening Ahura Mazdā and his cosmos sufficiently to bring back its pristine condition. Once this has happened, he asks for his reward: for himself good livelihood and absence of illness and untimely death, as well as his professional fee and, for his patron and his community, peace and fertility.

The ritual is thus the poet-sacrificer’s contribution to the cosmic struggle between good and evil, for either of which he has to take sides. The partisans of Order will take side for Ahura Mazdā and everything he stands for: truth, peace, and fertility, etc., while the partisans of the Lie, by advocating and supporting the other side, contribute to everything that is bad: lies, strife and war, sickness and death, both among humans and beasts and in the universe itself.

The Life-giving Man

When the poet-sacrificer has all the knowledge needed, has proved himself to abide by Ahura Mazdā's deals, and has won the competition, he becomes, on account of his good thought, the life-giving man and revitalizer, capable of assisting Ahura Mazdā.

In the *Gāthās*, the poet-sacrificer/Zarathustra obtains this status so by offering Ahura Mazdā his own life breath and bones to serve as material for the regeneration of the cosmos. The idea seems to be that the worshiper contributes to the rejuvenation of the cosmos by returning to Ahura Mazdā as a gift the substance of his own body, namely his life breath—through his poems—and his bones—through the sacrificial food—to use as substance for his recreated cosmos, originally given to him by Ahura Mazdā and expected to be (re)given after the revitalization. Thus, the reward is expected to be the same for the worshippers and other sustainers of Order.

By his action the cosmos returns to its original Ordered state: When Order ~ the diurnal sky is revitalized, becomes “full of vitality,” dawn can pull out through the luminous spaces, Ārmaiti ~ the earth, when again in view of the sun, resumes her mother-earth functions, and Ahura Mazdā is again in command and is encouraged to produce in exchange a new, true existence which is “juicy” in exchange value (1.34.15; 2.46.19; 3.50.11).

Corresponding to the revitalization of the cosmos by the revitalizers’ remaking it full of vitality, the process also provides for the humans who have been involved in the process, either directly or as associated with Zarathustra, “vitalizing strength,” occasionally also, it seems, the gods receive it.

Thoughts, Words, Actions.

The external aspect of a sacrifice consists of its words and actions, what can be heard and what can be seen. Thus the sacrifice is often defined as consisting of these two elements, that is, both the actions consisting of movement and gestures and the verbal actions, consisting, notably, of songs.

Words and actions do not spring from nothing, however. A sacrifice is something that has to be performed precisely and according to set rules, and in preliterate societies it is therefore obvious that knowledge and memory are crucial. Both knowledge and memory are contained in one’s mind or thought, which therefore serves the purpose of a “store of information” or “memory bank” (S. Tanbiah) for everything the professional poet-sacrificer needs. Consequently words and actions both presuppose thought, which directs and arranges, and so underlies, the other two.

Basically the terms thought, word, and action imply thinking true thoughts and speaking true words about reality as the Ordered cosmos established by Ahura Mazdā and performing the actions required to maintain this ordered cosmos. “Sin” basically consists in thinking and saying things that disagree with this reality, and so are untrue. Those who do this “lie” and thereby become partisans of the Lie.

In the microcosmos of the ritual, these terms, which pervade the entire corpus, clearly refer to ritual activities. The poet-sacrificer’s “good speech” is that of uttering his utterances correctly, and his “good actions” are those of performing the ritual actions correctly—both crucial for his success in contributing to the revitalizing the world, and both are dependent upon his “good thought” (singular).

Thus, during the ritual performance the poet-sacrificer produces ritual actions and utterances through the effort and talent of his “(good) thought,” and it is for this production he will be judged worthy or unworthy by Ahura Mazdā and his other critics.

There is some uncertainty as to the meaning of the word *yasna*, which is commonly translated as “sacrifice” or simply “worship.” Some of this uncertainty is inherent in the semantics of “sacrifice” itself. Some authors use this word to refer to animal (human) sacrifices, while others equate it with “religious ritual” in a general way. L. Renou specifically defines Old Indic *yajña* as the “oral part” of the sacrifice, as opposed to the “material part.” From the Old Avesta, however, it is relatively clear that the ritual performance consists of *yasna* and utterances, which indicates that *yasna*, in fact, refers to the material part of the sacrifice, that is, the various “acts.” More probably, perhaps, *yasna* refers to the entire sacrifice (hence my translation), including, especially, the utterances. Such a meaning is in

harmony with the all-purpose use of the verb *yaza-* in both Old and Young Avestan.

Ethics in the *Gâthâs*

There is thus clearly a double system of references in the *Gâthâs*: to the ritual and the divine sphere, and most concepts are represented in both. Whether there are also references to human society in general, is much more difficult to determine. There are, however, numerous references to “mortals” and “mortal men (and women),” represented as being in the service of the forces of good or evil. Among the more revealing passages is 2.46.11, which tells how bad poet-sacrificers use mortals as their coursers in the race for victory. It is therefore likely that the notion seen in the much later Zoroastrian books that humans participate in the cosmic struggle by performing in the world the same actions that the gods perform in heaven and the priest in the ritual. Hence we are allowed to apply the Old Avestan concepts—for instance, the two triads good/bad thoughts/words/actions—in a much wider context, even if this context only rarely appears explicitly in the poems.

The “homage” (*nemah*).

One of the most important actions is that of bending down in homage. This action has a two-fold symbolism. It aims at reproducing the bending of the fire and the movement of the earth bulging and bending, thereby expanding to provide more living space. Exactly what kind of motion the term refers to is not clear, whether a bending of the body forward and downward or a bending of the whole body, including the knees—which would both be a better imitation of the fire and produce contact with the earth—is not clear. The gesture of bent knees, however, is probably of Indo-European date.

The homage is closely related to the earth, Humility, who bends and undulates, as well as the fire, who does the same.

The sacrificial refreshments.

The foodstuffs offered during the ritual to the gods consist mainly of milk products, which are libated into the fire for transporting into the beyond. The libation par excellence is the fat dripping, and the action of libating devolves on the chief performer of the ritual, the libator. The other libated substance is the milk libation, which travels to heaven leaving its footprints along the way.

The sacrificer is offering the gods hymns and sacrificial food, as well as his own body and soul, and in return expects a reward from the gods. The distribution of the sacrificer’s gifts and those of the gods takes place at the Gift Exchange.¹

Gifts and counter-gifts.

The sacrifice is conceived as a great offering of gifts to Ahura Mazdâ and the other gods together with their creations. Its purpose and function is to support the gods and especially Ahura Mazdâ in sustaining and maintaining the ordered cosmos. Since the entire universe was originally ordered by Ahura Mazdâ and all human knowledge, including that of the mysteries of the sacrifice and the cosmos, was originally given to men by him, whatever gifts they give to the gods in the sacrifice originated with them. The gifts are material and/or “symbolic,” although the latter are of course no less real than the former. Both belong to the poet-sacrificer’s *imaginaire*, that is, his conception of total reality, their discrete elements together with their interactions.

The outcome of the ritual and the (imaginary) competition determines the rewards for gods and men, good and bad, also determined by Ahura Mazdâ at the beginning of the world (2.43.5). They are a part of the deal agreed upon

¹ Note especially: 1.282-7, 30.4, 34.12-13, 2.43.1, 4-8, 12, 16, 44.18-19, 46.10, 19, 3.48.4, 9, 49.9, 4.51.6, 14-15, 21, 5.53.7, 54.1.

between Ahura Mazdā and his followers, a *quid pro quo* or *do ut des*,¹ according to which the worshipper will supply Ahura Mazdā with fame, provided by the hymns of praise, and the sustenance needed to invigorate the divine sphere and its inhabitants, the sacrificial food (concrete or symbolic), including the substance and spirit of his own body. In return Ahura Mazdā is to bring about the revitalization and stabilization of Order and Ārmaiti, that is, the return of the sun as symbol of cosmic Order and the fecundity of the earth. This return of Order and life will supply the world of the living and its inhabitants with well-being, provided by the fecundity of the earth and men and animals, as well as absence of illness and untimely death and freedom from war and destruction, but also, because of an abundance of livestock, guarantees that he will be paid a handsome fee. Thus, the theme of mutual gifts and rewards constitutes the pragmatic axis, not only of the Old Avestan poems, but of the poet-sacrificer's conceptual universe, as they do in the *Rigveda*

where the sacrificer is promised wealth both temporal and in the world to come in return for his sacrifice, and his gifts to the priests, and where the gods are invoked to delight themselves with the offering and to reward their votaries.

... this theory of the sacrifice and its result as an exchange of gifts, of strength for strength, is the fundamental fact of the whole Vedic religion.²

Thus, the ritual, with its acts and words, represents the poet-sacrificer's—and through him—his entire community's—supreme gift to Ahura Mazdā and the other gods. By the rules and deals for “gift and counter-gift,” poet-sacrificer and Ahura Mazdā are friends and Ahura Mazdā, the friend, is therefore obliged to provide a counter-gift that matches in exchange value the gift of his friends, the poet-sacrificer and his community.

The principle of gifts and counter-gifts permeates the Avesta in general, and, in particular, constitutes the ideological fundament of the Old Avestan poet-sacrificer's world:

In the conclusion of the poem the theme of the reward becomes the theme of the poet's fee, which may consist in cows, horses, and camels. Non-payment of the fee when the poet has fulfilled his part of the “bargain” is considered breach of contract or of the deals and is a punishable offense.

The rewards, or, at least, the promises of gifts, are given according to this arrangement at the *maga* (OInd. *magha*), the ceremony of exchange, which takes place at the end of the competition and the audition. In charge of the *maga* is the Master of the Exchange (gifts).

The gift given in return for another gift should match—or, preferably, surpass—it in exchange value (*vasnā*).³

15.1. The yasna sacrifice

The Zoroastrian daily morning sacrifice is centered around the *haoma*, the Iranian counterpart of the Old Indic *soma*.⁴ In the *Rigveda*, this is a plant which, when pounded, filtered, and mixed with milk, is offered as a drink to the gods, who obtain enormous strength through it. It is what enables Indra to smash the obstructions that prevent the heavenly waters to come down and fertilize and rejuvenate the world. The function of the Zoroastrian *haoma* is similar, and it is similarly prepared during the sacrifice (*yasna*), the central act of which is the mixing of the *hōm* with milk and water into a drink (*parahaoma*) subsequently drunk by the priest. Although the *haoma* plays a crucial part in the Young

¹ It is not simply a matter of *do ut des* (Latin: “I give so that you shall give”), however, that is, since *I* give, *you* should also give, but the maintenance of an enduring cycle of *quid pro quo* of mutual indebtedness between god and his creation, starting and ending with Ahura Mazdā's sacrifices.

² A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, 2 vols., Cambridge, 1925; repr. 1989, Delhi, vol. I, chap. 18 §1: “The sacrifice as a gift,” p. 259 (with refs.).

³ This seems to be the original meaning of the Indo-European concept of **wesno-/*wosno-*, seen in Latin *venum dare* (French *vendre*)

⁴ The identity of this plant has been much discussed. In historical times, the Iranians have used twigs of ephedra. In fact, the ephedra can be a powerful hallucinogenic (see the recent and current discussion surrounding the use of ephedra as “nature drug”; check “ephedra” in Google). On the *haoma*, see also Boyce, 1970.

Avestan ritual, the word is absent from the *Old Avesta*, but its common epithet *dûraosha* (Old Indic *durosha*) of uncertain meaning is found once (1.32.14).¹

The purpose of the Avestan sacrifice, as reflected in the *Yasna*, is to regenerate the *ahu*, the living existence, after periods of darkness, sterility, and death (night, winter). During the ritual, the sacrificer constructs a microcosmic model of the cosmos as it was ordered by Ahura Mazdâ the first time: the first *ahu*. For this, all the models, or prototypes (*ratu*), of all the ingredients of the first *ahu* are invoked, invited, and ordered. The *haoma* sacrifice is performed, apparently in order to regenerate Zarathustra in the personality of the current sacrificer.² Once that is done, the sacrificer recites the *Gâthâs*, as they were first recited in the world of the living by Zarathustra, in order to smash and remove evil from the cosmos. The divine “readiness to listen,” Sraosha, who recited the *Gâthâs* for the first time in the world of thought, is praised in order to strengthen him in his battle against the forces of darkness, embodied in Wrath. The heavenly waters are invoked, as the birth waters of the new existence about to be born, and the sun, which is about to be born out of the world ocean as the symbol of Ahura Mazdâ’s Order.

In the *Yashts*, sacrifices of horses, cattle, and sheep are regularly offered to the deity worshipped, and, in historical times, bloody sacrifices were commonly practiced, although it is not clear whether the *yasna* also involved the actual immolation of a sacrificial animal or just a “symbolic” offering.

15.2. The Young Avestan Ritual

The Young Avestan ritual is known only from the texts that accompany it, the Vispered and the Yasna, both of which contain numerous indications of the ritual actions themselves.

The rituals known from modern times (from the time of Anquetil Duperron onward) may not be identical with those of the Median and Achaemenid periods, let alone of the Young Avestan period in eastern Iran, where the texts were presumably first composed, but they do follow the Yasna very closely.

According to the Vispered eight priests (ideally) participated in the ritual:

Hâwanan	Pressing priest
Âterwakhsh	Fire-lighting priest
Frabertar	Presenting priest
Âbert	Tending priest
Âsnatar	Washing priest
Raêthvishkara	Mingling priest
Sraoshâwarza	Auditing priest “most talented and of most correct words”
Zaotar	the Libating priest, says forth the <i>Yathâ ahû vairiyô</i> (the <i>Ahunavairiya</i> prayer)

Ritual invocations.

Just as in the Yasna Haptanghâiti, the Young Avestan texts (Yasna and Vispered) contain invocations listing large numbers of divine entities who are invited to come down and enjoy the benefits of the ritual. The formulas used are the following (cf. Cosmogony):

Yasna.

1. I announce to, I assemble for ... Model(s) of Order.
2. In this libation and barsom, by my sacrificing I harness ...
3. By my sacrificing I harness ... for winning the favor of ...
4. Thus we make them known ...

¹ Various meanings have been proposed for Av. *duraosha*, Old Indic *durosha*, among them “death-averter,” which is how the word is interpreted in the Pahlavi translations, apparently referring to the *haoma*’s (*soma*’s) ability to make the consumer feel immortal; “pungent,” referring to its taste; etc., but there are serious problems with all.

² This interpretation of the *haoma* sacrifice is suggested by the description of Zarathustra’s birth in *Dênkard* book 7.

6. We sacrifice ...
7. I place in Orderly fashion ... for winning the favor of ...

15.3. The modern *yasna* ceremony

The Parsi ritual described by Darmesteter basically consists of the offering of haoma before the fire but takes place in a room separate from that in which the fire is usually placed. The ceremony is basically the recitation of “the *yasna* in 72 chapters,” accompanied by occasional ritual actions.

Two priests are required, the *zōt* (Av. *zaotar*), and the *raspī*. The *zōt* is the primary reciter, while the *raspī* sometimes provides answers. The main function of the *raspī* is to feed the fire.

The ceremony has the following structure:

I. Preparations for the sacrifice (Paragra).

1. Preparation of blessed water.
2. Preparation of barsom: These were originally twigs from a special tree (ca. 40 cm ~ 15" long, judging from representations in art), but in India metal twigs are used. — The barsom may originally have symbolized the vegetal nature, complementary to the water.
3. Preparation of the string (*aiviyāngam*, modern *evanghin*) used to tie the barsom. It is made from a date palm leaf cut into six strands, which are braided and tied together and deposited in a vase with sacred water.
4. Preparation of the plant (*urwarām*): A shoot from a pomegranate is cut off and put into the vase.
5. Preparation of the milk (*jīwiyām*): A goat facing east (direction of the rising sun) is milked by a priest (mowbed) facing south (turning his back on the evil forces).
6. Preparation of the ghee (*gōshudō*, from Av. *gāush hudaw* “the cow giving good gifts”).
7. The bread (*darūn*, Av. *draonah*, OInd. *dronas*, the solid offering), round cakes.
8. Preparation of the *hōm* (*parahōm*). Branches of ephedra are washed in sacred water. A mortar is prepared by striking the walls, especially the northern side (direction of the evil forces), with the pestle. The *hōm* is placed in the mortar with the pomegranate twigs and pounded, and water is added. The juice is then filtered through a net made of hairs from a sacred bull (now a metal ring with 3, 5, or 7 hairs).

II. The sacrifice.

Y.1-2: Invitation of the deities.

Y.3-8: Offering of the *darūn*, at the end of which the chief priest, the “libator” (Av. *zaotar*, Pahl. *zōt*) consumes the *darūn* and the *gōshudō* (ghee).

Y.9-11: Offering of the *haoma*, at the end of which the *zōt* consumes the *parahōm*.

Y.12: Libation of the waters, profession of faith.

Praise of the three holy prayers.

Y.22-24: Beginning of the offering of the *hōm* (*homāst*).

Y.25-27: Preparation of the *hōm*.

Y.27: Recitation of the *Ahunwar* (the *Ahunavairiya* prayer).

Y.28-53: Recitation of the *Gāthās*, etc.

Y.54: Recitation of the fourth holy prayer, the *Airiyāma ishiyō* prayer.

Y.54-55: Praise of the *Gāthās* and the *Staota yesniya* texts.

Y.56-57: Praise of Srōsh (Av. Sraosha), greatest fighter of the powers of darkness.

Y.58-61: Various prayers.

Y.62: Praise of the fire and offering of *hōm* to the fire, in anticipation of the rebirth of the sun.

Y.63-69: Consecration of the waters: Water is mixed with the *hōm* and milk, is poured over the barsom, etc. – The sun is about to be born out of the heavenly (birth) waters.

Y.70-72: Conclusion: Untying of the barsom. Some of the sacred water (*parahōm*) is returned to the well.

The rest of the *parahōm* is drunk by the one who ordered the sacrifice or by one of the assistants.

15.4. Other rituals

The longest ritual is the *videvdad sade*, which is performed from midnight on and whose purpose is to heal the ailing world of Ahura Mazdâ, indeed, the ailing Ahura Mazdâ himself, and the *yasna*, the morning ritual, which regenerates the world and re-engenders to heavenly fire. During the *videvdad sade*, a modified *Yasna* with the substitutions of the *Vispered* is recited, and the *Old Avesta* is embedded in the *Videvdad*.

Other ritual performances include the five *niyâyishns* “songs” and the five *gâhs* “times (of the day).” The *niyâyishns* are hymns to the sun, Mithra, the moon, the waters, and the fire. The *Song to the sun*, is recited three times a day, at daybreak, noon, and sunset; the *Song to Mithra* at daybreak following the *Song to the sun*; the *Song to the moon* three times every month, at new moon, the full moon, and the last quarter; the *Song to the waters* is performed during the day, near water (rivers and wells) and when one sees running water; and the *Song to the Fire*, which is performed five times at day and night by the priest who oversees the fire. The *gâhs* are hymns in honor of the five divisions of the day (see below).

The individual deities also have special rituals devoted to them. According to the hymn to Mithra, the libations to this deity should be consumed only after two days of washing the entire body and undergoing rigorous austerities including twenty whiplashes daily.

Animal sacrifices were probably common, but not often mentioned. In the hymn to Haoma, the deity complains about the sacrificers who do not give him the portion of the victim that his father Ahura Mazdâ had assigned to him, namely, a cheek with the tongue and the left eye.

According to the *yashts*, the mythical sacrificers sacrificed to their deities hundreds of stallions, thousands of bulls, and ten thousand sheep.

There are numerous private rituals that have to do with human life. Among them are the ritual of tying the sacred girdle, the *kusti* ritual, and the great purification ritual, the *barshnûm* ceremony (see below).

Zoroastrians wear a white shirt (*vastra* “garment”) made out of one large piece of woven fabric and a girdle (*aiviyânghana*, modern *kusti*), a long string, woven on a hand-loom in a particularly complex manner. In the later tradition, the shirt is said to symbolize Good Thought and the girdle the *daênâ mâtadayasni*. The *kusti* is tied several times a day (after washing the hands) in an elaborate ritual. It is tied for the first time at the age of fifteen (today earlier) in a coming-of-age ceremony, and omission to wear it after that is a grave sin.

15.5. Prayers

Several short texts are frequently recited during official or personal ceremonies. The most important are the *Yatâ ahû vairyô* (*Ahuna vairiya*) and the *Ā Airyamâ ishiyô* (*Airyaman ishiya*) which are the first and last strophes of the first and fifth *Gâthâ*, respectively, and the *Ashem vohû* and *Yenghyê hâtâm*, which are short versions of the first and last strophes of the second and fourth *Gâthâ*, respectively. The *Yatâ ahû vairyô* is about generating the royal command for Ahura Mazdâ, the renewing of the ordered world after the model (*ratu*) of Ahura Mazdâ’s first ordered world (*ahu*), and making him the protector of the poor; the *Ashem vohû* is about the benefit of contributing to the renewal of Ahura Mazdâ’s order and the *Yenghyê hâtâm* about the rewards for the sacrifice; and the *Ā Airyamâ ishiyô* expresses the result of the Old Avestan ritual of healing and reordering the world.

By Young Avestan times, the exact meaning of much of the *Gâthâs* had been forgotten, however, and, especially, that of the elliptic *Yathâ ahû vairyô*, and the terms *ahu* and *ratu*, in particular, which in the later tradition were understood to mean spiritual and secular master.

These prayers are very potent weapons against the powers of evil. Ahura Mazdâ recited the *Yatâ ahû vairyô* against the Evil Spirit in the beginning, before the creation of the world of the living (Y.19.1-4), and Zarathustra recited the *Ahuna vairiya* to drive the *daêwas* underground (Y.9.14-15) and to heal the world of the living (V.19.10), and he recited the *Ahuna vairiya* and the *Ashem vohû* against the Evil Spirit to chase him from the earth.

In the *Avesta*, one or more *Ashem vohūs* are said before and after most texts, and the *Yathâ ahû vairyô* is frequently recited in tandem by the two priests (see below); the *Yenghyê hâtâm* is frequently recited at the end of text sections, notably in the *yashts*; and the *Airyaman ishiya* is recited in particular against illnesses.

Another commonly recited text is the *Frawarânê* and the related *Jasa mē awanghyê Mazda* “Come to my aid, O (Ahura) Mazdâ,” in which the good Mazdayasnian forswears evil and allies him/herself with Ahura Mazdâ.

Gathic citations are also commonly used as prayers.

Pollution and purification rituals

Pollution results from contact with “dead matter,” of which there are many kinds. The most obvious are carcasses of humans and animals, but all excretions from the body, as soon as they have left the body, are also considered to become infected by the corpse demon. Among these are blood, hair, nails, spilled semen (V.18.46), urine, and feces.

According to V.17, when one combs and cuts one’s hair and cuts one’s nails, one should dispose of the hair and nail pairings properly. If disposed of properly, they will become weapons against the *daêwas*; if not, evil things will grow from them.

A special case is that of the person who disposes of corpses for a living. On the one hand, he is completely polluted by death, but, on the other, he is doing the community an enormous service. When he is judged after death, what counts is the total of other activities beyond serving as an undertaker.

The female demon of pollution (*nasush*) attacks the body through its openings, beginning with nose and eyes and ending with the penis and anus.

Pollution does not occur if a person has no way of knowing that he/she has come in contact with dead matter; in particular, dead matter transmitted by wind, dogs, birds, wolves, or flies does not pollute (V. 5.1-7).

Menstruation

The menstrual period is divided into three stages characterized by the nature of the menstrual flow, when the woman is “having the signs [having clear flow?], having the marks [?], and having blood” (*chithrawaitî daxshtawaitî vohunawaitî*). When she is in a state of impurity, she presents a danger to the good creations (water, fire, the “orderly” man) and must be isolated from them in a “quiet place” (V.16). The nature of her place (*gâtu*) is not specified in the *Avesta* other than its distance from the good creations. Her period normally lasts eight nights. More than that means that the *daêwas* are at work, and a purification/exorcism ritual is performed.

Purification

The principal purification agents are water and urine. The urine is usually from a cow/bull (*gêush maêzman*, mod. *gômêz*), but urine from people is sometimes used. Both people and objects, for instance, garments (V. 7.11-15) and ritual implements are washed in this manner (V. 7.73-75). Occasionally, urine is specified to be from a bull (V. 19.21) or water rather than urine is specified (V. 8.39).

Washing people means exorcising the *nasush*, and the procedure follows the order with which she pollutes the body. Thus, when the top of the head is washed, the *nasush* runs to the space between the eyebrows, via the right eye and the left eye, etc., and, in the end it hides under the sole of the foot in the shape of a fly’s wing. Pouring water on the toes finally disposes of her. This ritual is called *barshnûm* from the word for “top of the head,” described in chap. 9 of the *Videvdad*. This ritual takes place in a space demarcated by a complex pattern of furrows, dividing it into three areas, in each of which three holes (*magha*) are dug and stepping stones of the hardest kind, permitting the person to be purified to move to the holes without stepping on the ground.

Some purification rituals also involve killing harmful animals, for instance, in the case of protracted menstruation, when one should kill a “grain-pulling ant” in summer, but 200 harmful animals in winter.

16. THE PARTS OF THE AVESTA

According to the tradition, under Khosrow (531-579), the Avesta was divided into 21 books, or *nasks*, the contents of which are given in the *Dēnkard*, a Pahlavi text compiled in the 9th century. From this it appears that only one of the books have been preserved virtually complete: the *Videvdad*; of most of the others only smaller or larger parts are now extant. The loss of so much of the Sasanian Avesta since the 9th century must be ascribed to the effect of the difficulties that beset the Zoroastrian communities after the Muslim conquest of Iran.

The *Avesta* is traditionally divided into several parts (details see \$\$):

16.1. *The Yasna*

A miscellany of texts recited during the *yasna* ritual, among which are:

Hôm-yasht (Y.9-11), prayer or hymn in praise of Haoma;
Frawarâne, the Zoroastrian profession of faith (Y.12);
Baghân yasht, a commentary on the sacred prayers (Y.22-26);
three sacred prayers (Y.27): *Yenghyê hâtâm*, *Ashem vohû*, *Yathâ ahû vairiyô* (*Ahunwar*);
the *Gâthâs* “songs” (Y.28-34, 43-51, 53): poetry ascribed to Zarathustra in Old Avestan;
Yasna Haptanghâiti “the sacrifice in seven sections” (Y.35-41): Old Avestan composed in an archaic kind of metrical prose;
Srôsh-yasht (Y.57), hymn addressed to Sraosha, god of obedience and judge in the hereafter;
Âb zôhr (Y.63-72)

Vispered (Vr.): a miscellany of ritual texts, mostly invocations;

16.2. *The yashts*

Yashts (Yt.): collection of hymns to individual deities:

Yashts 1-4 to Ahura Mazdâ and the Amesha Spentas;
Yasht 5 to Ardwî Sûrâ Anâhitâ, the heavenly river and goddess of the waters;
Yasht 6 to the sun;
Yasht 7 to the moon;
Yasht 8 to Tishtriya, the star Sirius, who controls the weather and the rain;
Yasht 9, *Gôsh yasht*, to Druwâspâ;
Yasht 10 to Mithra (Mithra), god of contracts and agreements, of dawn, etc.;
Yasht 11 to Sraosha;
Yasht 12 to Rashnu, judge in the beyond
Yasht 13 to the Frawashis (fravashis), the pre-souls (cf. *frawarâne*);
Yasht 14 to Verthraghna (Verthraghna), god of victory who manifests himself in 10 different incarnations;
Yasht 15, according to its title dedicated to Râm, but actually about Vayu, the personification of the space between heaven and earth, who has two sides, one good and one evil;
Yasht 16, *Dêñ yasht*, to Cistâ;
Yasht 17 to Ashi, the goddess of good fortune and protectress of the family;
Yasht 18: *Ashtâd yasht*;
Yasht 19, according to its title dedicated to the genius of the earth but actually about the Kavian Fortune (*khwarnah*);
Yasht 20 to Haoma;
Yasht 21 to the star *Vanant*.

16.3. The Khorda Avesta

Khorda Avesta (KhA.) “little Avesta”: a miscellany of hymns and other ritual texts, among which are:

The *Niyâyishns* (Ny.) “prayers” to the sun, Mithra, the moon, Ardwî Sûrâ Anâhitâ (the waters), Âtash î Bahrâm (the fire);

The *Sîrôzas* (S.), invocations of the deities in charge of the 30 days of the months.

The *Âfrînagân* (Âfr.), various invocations.

16.4. The Videvdad

Videvdad (V.) (also *Vendidad*) literally “the law(s) or regulations (serving to keep) the demons away”: mainly a collection of texts concerned with purification rituals. It also contains some mythological material:

chap. 1: contains a description of how Ahura Mazdâ created the various provinces of Iran and how the Evil Spirit, as his counter-creation, made a scourge for each province;

chap. 2 contains the myth of Yima, the first king, who built a fortress to house mankind during a coming winter;

chap. 19 contains a description of the struggle between Zarathustra and the Evil Spirit;

16.5. Smaller texts

Hâdôkht nask (HN.): a text about the fate of the soul after death;

Aogemadaêca (Aog.): an eschatological text;

Êhrbedestân and *Nîrangestân* (N.): religious legal texts;

Purishnîhâ (P.): a collection of questions and answers regarding religious matters.

16.7. Modern Avestan texts

The following three are late (modern) compilations but contain some fragments not found elsewhere:

Âfrîn-e Payghambar Zardosht: Zarathustra’s advice to Vishtâspa;

Vishtâsp yasht: Vishtâspa’s words to Zarathustra;

Vaêthâ nask.

16.8. Fragments

There are numerous *Fragments* from extant and lost Avestan texts quoted in the Pahlavi translation of the other Avestan texts and in Pahlavi texts. Of special interest is the so-called *Frahang î ôim êk* (FO.), which is a vocabulary of Avestan words and phrases with their Pahlavi translation. The first entry is Avestan *ôim* = Pahlavi *êk*, whence the name.